

Early Learning Coalitions' Administration and Program Support Expenses Vary Widely; Opinions Divided on Coalition Efficiency

at a glance

The current local governance structure for early education programs provides flexibility and input from a broad range of stakeholders. Early learning coalitions may establish delivery systems based on local conditions such as resource availability and community needs. The coalition governing boards help ensure community input in key policy decisions and oversight activities.

In 2006-07, early learning coalitions spent an average of 9.5% of their funds to administer and provide program support to the School Readiness and VPK programs. Coalitions vary substantially on the proportion of their budgets they spend on these activities. Coalition size and population density, community partnerships, and economies of scale may contribute to this variation.

Program stakeholders are divided in their opinions on the efficiency of the governance structure. The most frequently cited inefficiencies included oversight activities and communication/training. Stakeholders also raised concerns over board membership requirements, the inability of certain board members to vote on important issues, and board member attendance issues.

The Legislature could consider four options if it wished to change the way local early education programs are structured. Stakeholder support for these options depends on the group they represent.

Scope

As directed by the Legislature, this report examines the local governance structure for Florida's early education programs. The report addresses three main questions.

- How much do coalitions spend on administration and program support activities?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the current local governance structure for early education programs?
- What alternatives could the Legislature consider to the current local governance structure?

This report is one in a series of two OPPAGA reports on Florida's early education programs. The first report in this series examined Florida's state-level governance structure for early education programs.¹

Background

Florida's families with young children can receive early education services through a number of state and federal programs. These programs provide educational, health, nutritional, social and therapeutic services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally and mentally ready to succeed in school. The early education programs include School Readiness, Voluntary Prekindergarten Education, Prekindergarten Disabilities, Early Steps, Head Start, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, and Even Start Family Literacy. The state's two largest early educational programs are School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK).

¹ *The Governance Structure of Florida's Early Education Programs Presents Some Administrative Challenges*, [OPPAGA Report No. 08-35](#), June 2008.

Governance of Florida’s early education programs has evolved over time. The governance structure for the state’s early education programs has evolved in recent years at both the state and local levels. The current structure resulted from legislative actions to create a comprehensive program of readiness services and to implement a constitutional amendment establishing the state’s prekindergarten program. The Legislature established the School Readiness Program in 1999 by combining multiple programs serving low income or at-risk children with the federal subsidized childcare program. This consolidation was intended to provide comprehensive services for young children to prepare them for school. The Legislature created the VPK Program in 2004, after Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment establishing the program for all four-year-olds, regardless of family income.²

The current state-level structure involves three state agencies. As lead agency, the Agency for Workforce Innovation oversees the day-to-day operations of the VPK and School Readiness programs.³ The Department of Education is primarily responsible for developing educational standards and measuring program outcomes for the VPK Program. The Department of Children and Families licenses and conducts health and safety inspections at childcare facilities and homes, many of which provide services to children participating in the VPK and School Readiness programs. The Department of Children and Families also provides basic state-mandated childcare training for childcare personnel and issues credentials for providers including the Gold Seal designation to providers that meet certain standards.

At the local level, a network of central agencies administered the subsidized child care program under the direction of the Department of Children and Families until 1999, when the Legislature created School Readiness Coalitions to manage the School Readiness Program. Since that time, as directed by law, several coalitions have merged to serve multiple counties.⁴

² On November 5, 2002, Florida voters approved Amendment 8 to Article IX of the Florida Constitution creating the state’s universal Prekindergarten program. Subsequently, the 2004 Legislature created a free, voluntary prekindergarten education program for Florida children four years of age beginning with the September 2005 school year.

³ Sections 411.01(4)(b)1. and 1002.75(1), *F.S.*

⁴ Section 411.01(5), *F.S.*, permits 30 or fewer coalitions and requires coalitions serving fewer than 2,000 children to merge. Florida law authorizes the early learning coalitions in Sarasota, Osceola, and Santa Rosa counties, which were in operation on January 1, 2005, to continue to operate as independent coalitions and not to be counted within the 30-coalition limit.

Exhibit 1 provides an overview of key events affecting the governance structure of early education programs.

**Exhibit 1
The Governance Structure of the State’s Early Education Programs Has Evolved Over the Years**

Year	Action
Before 1999	Responsibility for School Readiness programs was divided among the state departments of Education and Children and Families and the federal Head Start Program. The Department of Education administered and funded school-based readiness programs such as the Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program, Prekindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities, Florida First Start, and Migrant Prekindergarten. The Department of Children and Families administered the Subsidized Childcare Program, which provided childcare services to at-risk and economically disadvantaged children since 1978.
1999	The Legislature enacted the School Readiness Act, creating the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, a state-level governing board to coordinate statewide program efforts and creating School Readiness coalitions in each county to plan and implement a comprehensive program of readiness services. The Partnership was assigned to the Executive Office of the Governor for administrative purposes (Ch. 99-357, <i>Laws of Florida</i>).
2000	To staff the Partnership, the Legislature transferred Subsidized Childcare Program positions from the Department of Children and Families and the Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program in the Department of Education to the Partnership (Ch. 2000-149, <i>Laws of Florida</i>).
2001	The Legislature transferred administrative support of the Partnership from the Executive Office of the Governor to the Agency for Workforce Innovation (Ch. 2001-170, <i>Laws of Florida</i>). The Legislature also repealed the statutory authority for the individual school-based readiness programs thereby creating a single readiness program under the direction of the Partnership and local coalitions.
2004	The 2004 Legislature revised the School Readiness Program and created the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program pursuant to the voter-approved constitutional amendment requiring prekindergarten for every four-year-old. The bill eliminated the Partnership and transferred its responsibility for early education to the Agency for Workforce Innovation, making the agency responsible for state-level coordination of the School Readiness and VPK programs and of the School Readiness coalitions, which were renamed early learning coalitions. This legislation also limited the number of early learning coalitions to 30, with some exceptions. The Department of Education was made responsible for developing educational standards and measuring program outcomes for the VPK Program (Ch. 2004-484, <i>Laws of Florida</i>).

Source: *Laws of Florida*.

Currently, 31 early learning coalitions administer early education programs. The coalitions administer programs through grant awards from the Agency for Workforce Innovation’s Office of Early Learning. They are incorporated as private, not-for-profit organizations operating under the direction of a governing board whose membership and voting privileges are outlined in statute.⁵

Each coalition board hires an executive director responsible for implementing board policies, managing funds, and overseeing day-to-day operations. The coalition provides a range of services which typically include resource and referral, eligibility determination, screening and assessments, parental support programs, provider payment processing, professional development training, quality services, and monitoring service providers. Coalitions contract with childcare providers such as private centers, family homes, and public schools to provide the School Readiness and VPK programs. The coalitions may also use contractors for administrative services related to the School Readiness and VPK programs.

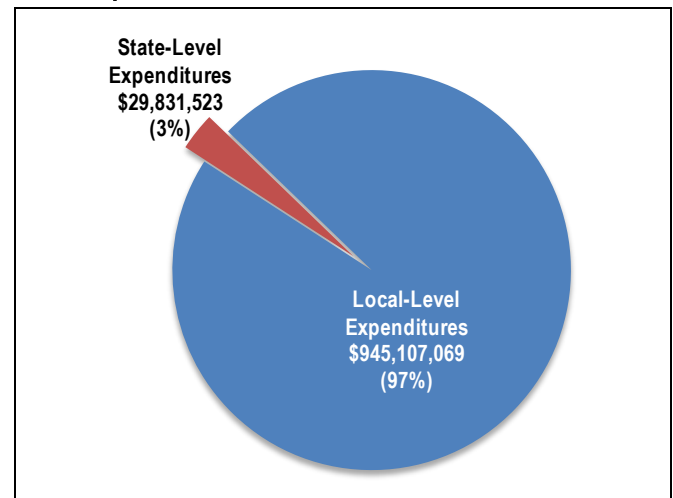
Coalition boards oversee program implementation and resource allocation. The Legislature created local coalition boards with the intent that they design programs to meet local early learning needs, improve contracting practices, and leverage local resources to serve more children. Coalition boards determine local service priorities, the number of children the coalition will serve in each age range, the amount of funding that it will allocate to direct services for children, the level of funding the coalition will spend on provider training and other quality initiatives, and whether to provide services in-house or contract out for services.

By law, board membership must include business leaders and other state and local partners involved in serving children such as the Department of Children and Families, school districts, and county health departments. Coalition boards vary in size depending on the number of counties served. Florida law authorizes coalition boards to have between 18 and 35 members. The board chair must be a private, local business member appointed by the governor. Each board chair also serves on the Early Learning Advisory Council to provide

recommendations to the Agency for Workforce Innovation on early education policy.⁶

Most early education funds are expended at the local level. For Fiscal Year 2006-07, the most recent year for which complete data was readily available during our review, state agencies reported that total expenditures related to the School Readiness and VPK programs were \$975 million. Local early learning coalitions spent the vast majority (\$945 million, or 97%) of these funds on early childhood services delivered by childcare providers, quality initiatives, and administration and related functions (see Exhibit 2). Approximately two-thirds (\$655 million, or 69%) of local expenditures were related to the implementation of the School Readiness Program, and the remaining one-third was spent implementing the VPK Program. The Agency for Workforce Innovation, the Department of Child and Families, and the Department of Education reported expenditures of \$29.8 million (3% of the total) on School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten administration, training, licensing, and support activities.⁷

**Exhibit 2
In Fiscal Year 2006-07, Most Early Education Funds Were Expended at the Local Level**



Note: Based on reported expenditures from July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007.

Source: The Agency for Workforce Innovation, the Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Education.

⁶ Section 1002.77, F.S.

⁷ For more detailed information on state-level expenditures by agency, refer to *The Governance Structure of Florida’s Early Education Programs Presents Some Administrative Challenges*, [OPPAGA Report No. 08-35](#), June 2008.

⁵ Section 411.01, F.S.

Questions

How much do coalitions spend on administration and program support activities?

In 2006-07, early learning coalitions spent an average of 9.5% of their funds to administer and provide program support to the School Readiness and VPK programs. The coalitions varied substantially in how much they spent on these activities. Several factors can contribute to these differences, including the geographic size and population density of coalition service areas, their ability to partner with other community organizations, and economies of scale. Coalitions that optimize their efficiency may be able to reduce these costs and, thus, maximize the funds they have to provide services to children.

On average, coalitions spent 9.5% of their funds in 2006-07 to administer and provide program support to the School Readiness and VPK programs

Stakeholders have raised questions about how much money the coalitions spend on administration versus providing direct services for children. This concern has been raised because federal and state laws both limit coalition administration costs to a maximum of 5% of their funding. However, coalitions' School

Readiness administration expenditures do not include the costs associated with program support activities that coalitions perform to ensure that children and families receive the services they need.

This issue arises due to federal regulations that govern the classification of School Readiness Program expenditures. Federal law requires coalitions to classify School Readiness Program expenditures into four categories: administration, non-direct, quality, and direct (provider payments). In contrast, state law requires coalitions to use two categories for classifying VPK Program expenditures: administration and direct services. Thus, what is classified and reported as "administration" varies between the two programs.

In general, coalitions report expenditures for program planning, development, and coordination for both programs as administration. However, coalitions report costs for necessary functions such as eligibility determination, childcare placement, and provider payment processing as non-direct for the School Readiness Program while they report costs for these activities as administration for the VPK Program (see Exhibit 3). Thus, as a result of federal reporting requirements, coalitions' reported administration expenditures do not include the cost of several program support services that many stakeholders would expect using a broader definition of administration. This can lead to confusion and concerns that the coalitions are not transparent in their reporting.

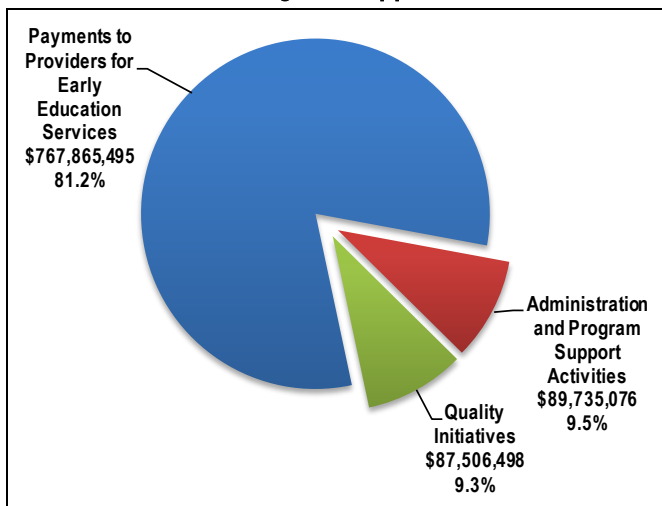
Exhibit 3 Activities Classified as Administration and Non-Direct Vary by Program

Examples of Administration and Non-Direct Expenditure Categories by Program	
School Readiness	VPK
Administration	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program planning, development, and coordination • Preparing reports and other documents • Program monitoring and evaluation • Disseminating program information • Travel costs incurred in carrying out the program • Accounting services • Audit services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program planning, development, and coordination • Preparing reports and other documents • Program monitoring and evaluation • Disseminating program information • Travel costs incurred in carrying out the program • Accounting services • Audit services • Eligibility determination • Recruitment of providers
Non-Direct	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility determination and childcare placement • Monitoring of placements • Social services • Recruitment of providers 	<i>Included in administration</i>

Sources: Code of Federal Regulations and Agency for Workforce Innovation other cost accumulator code (OCA) definitions.

To address this issue, we classified the coalitions' expenditures into three consistent categories—administration and program support, quality initiatives, and payments to providers. As shown in Exhibit 4, overall, coalitions spent about 9.5% of their funds on administration and program support activities.⁸ These activities included program planning, development, and coordination as well as eligibility determination, childcare placement, and provider payment processing. Coalitions spent an additional 9.3% of their funds on quality initiatives, such as professional development activities for childcare providers, assistance to help providers meet state and local childcare standards and health and safety requirements, differential pay to providers who meet specific national accreditation standards, and resource and referral services.⁹ Coalitions spent their remaining funds (81.2%) on direct services to children and their families.

Exhibit 4
In Fiscal Year 2006-07, Coalitions Spent 9.5% on Administration and Program Support Activities



Notes: Based on reported expenditures from July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007. Administration and Program Support reflects each coalition's reported VPK and School Readiness program administration and non-direct expenses combined. Quality Initiatives includes \$30 million in rate differential payments to School Readiness providers who achieved Florida "Gold Seal" quality status through accreditation and \$7.4 million in expenditures related to childcare resource and referral.
 Source: The Agency for Workforce Innovation and OPPAGA analysis.

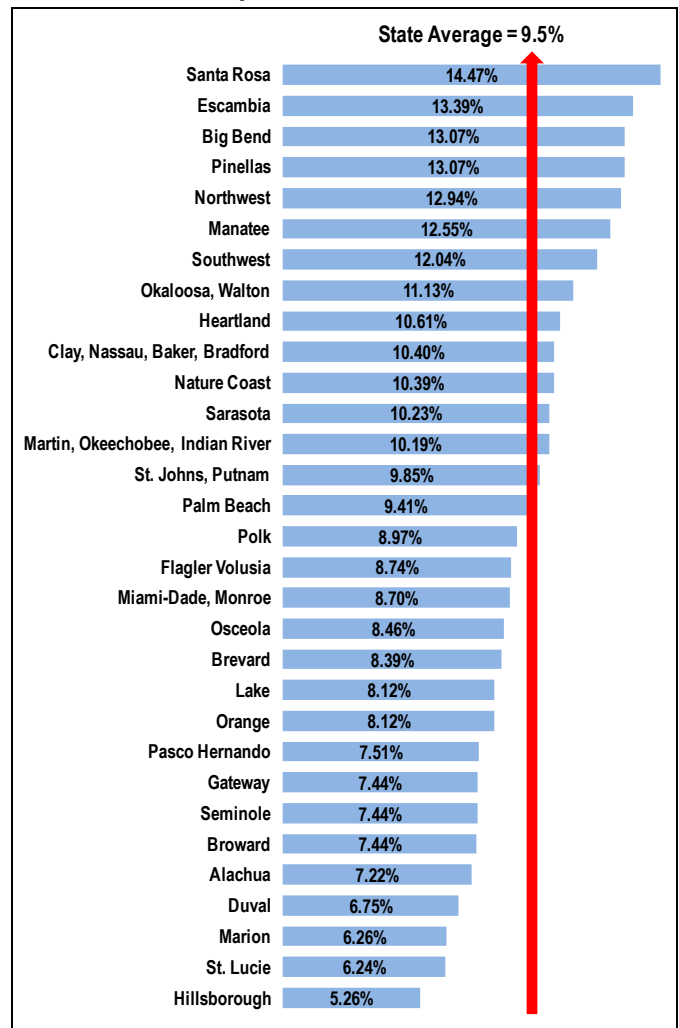
⁸ Coalitions reported spending more on non-direct activities than on administration. In 2006-07, coalitions reported that they spent 6% (\$55,213,276) on non-direct activities such as eligibility determination, child placement, and provider payment processing in support of the School Readiness and VPK programs. Coalitions spent slightly less (4%, or \$34,521,799) on School Readiness and VPK program administration.

⁹ Childcare resource and referral is a federally mandated consumer education program available to all parents seeking information on childcare options and community resources and support.

Coalitions varied considerably in the amount they spent on administration and program support activities

As shown in Exhibit 5, the percentage that the state's 31 early learning coalitions spent on administration and program support activities varied greatly. Hillsborough reported that it devoted the least (5.26%) of any coalition to these activities in 2006-07. In contrast, administration and program support expenditures accounted for approximately 14.47% of Santa Rosa's total expenditures during the same period.

Exhibit 5
The Percentage Coalitions Spent on Administration and Program Support Activities in Fiscal Year 2006-07 Varied Considerably



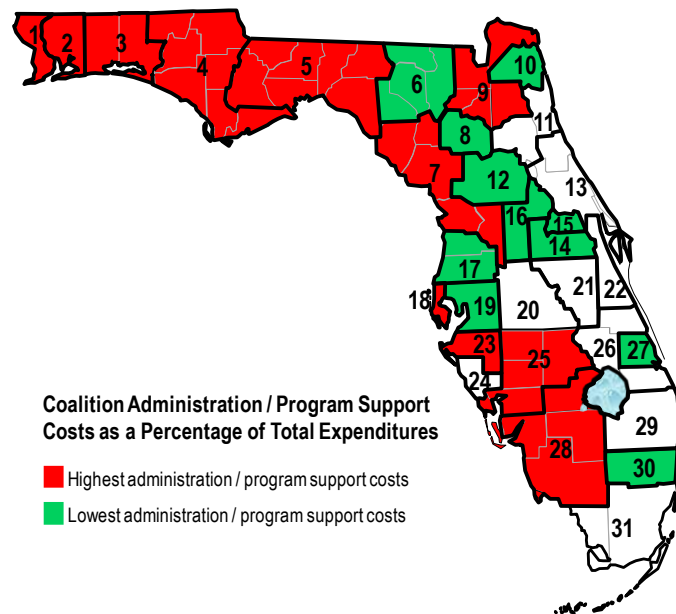
Note: Based on reported expenditures from July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007. Administration and Program Support reflects each coalition's reported VPK and School Readiness program administration and non-direct expenses combined.
 Source: The Agency for Workforce Innovation and OPPAGA analysis.

To identify reasons for this variation, we interviewed staff in the five coalitions that spent the highest percentage and the five coalitions that spent the lowest percentage of their early education funds in 2006-07 on administration and program support activities. Based on these interviews, we determined that the geographic size and population density of a coalition’s service area, its ability to partner with other community organizations, economies of scale, and coalition efficiency are among the factors that may contribute to differences in administration and program support activities expenses among coalitions. However, it is not clear the degree to which each of these factors accounts for the overall variation among coalitions or which coalitions are doing the best job at maximizing services to children.

A coalition’s geographic size and population density may affect its ability to minimize administration and program support expenses. The 11 coalitions (approximately one-third) that reported spending the largest percentage of their total early education funds in 2006-07 on administration and program support activities were primarily located in the Florida panhandle and southwest region of the state (see Exhibit 6). Compared to other coalitions, these coalitions were more likely to serve one or more less populated, rural counties. In contrast, coalitions whose administration and program support costs were at or below the state average tended to serve smaller geographic areas in the state’s more heavily populated urban and suburban centers.

Coalition staff indicated that the geographic size and the number of rural counties coalitions serve affects the amount coalitions must spend on administration and program support activities such as travel and staff coverage. For instance, the Early Learning Coalition of Northwest Florida, located in the state’s panhandle, serves approximately 3,000 School Readiness children over a seven-county area. Most of the coalition’s service area is sparsely populated—two of the seven counties, Franklin and Gulf, serve only about 70 children each in the School Readiness Program during the year. As these counties do not serve enough children to warrant a full-time staff person, a coalition staff member must travel to these counties to complete client eligibility services, increasing administrative and travel costs.

Exhibit 6
Coalitions in the Panhandle and Southwest Region of the State Spent a Higher Percentage of Funds on Administration and Program Support Activities



Note: Appendix A provides a map that identifies each coalition by name. Source: The Agency for Workforce Innovation and OPPAGA analysis.

Staff of the Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region, which has the third highest administration and program support expenses at 13.07%, cited similar examples of increased costs associated with serving seven largely rural counties. To serve families in outlying counties, the coalition has four satellite offices, although the coalition serves relatively few children in these counties. The coalition executive director asserted that the field offices are needed, as families would otherwise have to drive 50 miles or more to Tallahassee for eligibility determination. The coalition classified the salaries of staff in these offices primarily as non-direct expenses because the staff work directly with providers, handle family eligibility screening and registration, organize training, and respond to technical assistance requests.

Economies of scale may help some coalitions reduce administration and program support costs. Coalition staff also indicated that larger coalitions can benefit from economies of scale. Several coalitions serving communities with large populations of young children, including Broward, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade/Monroe, and Palm Beach, reported relatively low administration and program support expense

rates in 2006-07. The executive director of one of these large coalitions indicated that larger coalitions have more flexibility to shift resources to meet enrollment fluctuations and can allocate their administration costs across larger numbers of children. In contrast, staff of coalitions that serve fewer children indicated that their coalitions can encounter diseconomies of scale, as many activities, such as meetings with providers, require the same level of staff time and costs regardless of whether 50 or 150 providers attend. To help realize such economies of scale, the 2004 Florida Legislature required small early learning coalitions to merge, resulting in the number of coalitions decreasing from 50 to 31.

Partnering may help coalitions reduce administration and program support costs. Coalition staff we interviewed indicated that some coalitions have the ability to draw on substantial local revenue sources, which can reduce the amount they must spend on administration and program support activities. Voters in eight Florida counties have granted independent taxing authority to local children's services councils to fund programs and services that improve the lives of children and their families.¹⁰ Most of these independent children's services councils are located in large, urban counties. According to the Florida Children's Services Council, a nonprofit organization that represents several children's services councils, independent councils typically generate significant amounts of funding that support a range of children's programs in their respective counties, including early education and after school programs.

Four of the seven coalitions with independent children's services councils reported administration and program support spending below the state average in 2006-07.¹¹ For instance, Hillsborough received approximately \$1.6 million in 2006-07 from its children's services council, the Children's Board of Hillsborough County. The coalition used these funds to meet Florida's local matching requirements, serve additional children, and implement a major quality initiative.¹² In addition to this direct support,

the board provided approximately \$80,000 in donations that enabled the coalition to substantially reduce its overhead costs. These donations included free rent, telephone service, postage, paper, utilities, furniture, computer equipment, and copy machines. The coalition also obtains employee benefits, such as state retirement and health insurance, through the board at a substantially reduced cost. According to coalition staff, without these additional local funds and in-kind donations, the coalition would not have been able to serve as many children and would have incurred additional administration expenses.

Other factors may influence the percentage coalitions spend on administration and program support. Coalition staff asserted that several other factors, in addition to those described above, influence coalition costs. These include regional differences in costs of living, contracting practices, market competition among contracting agencies, staffing levels, cross-training, collaboration with other governmental and nonprofit organizations serving young children and families, and the quality of services a coalition provides to families and the community. As a result, the relative efficiency of each coalition cannot be precisely compared, and it is not feasible to determine whether individual coalitions could increase the level of funding they allocate to services to children and families without more in-depth analysis of their management operations.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the current local governance structure for early education programs?

Among the advantages associated with the current local governance structure for early learning programs is that it provides coalitions with flexibility in designing programs to meet local needs and a mechanism for broad community input, coordination, and accountability. However, stakeholders cited several disadvantages associated with the structure as well. For instance, stakeholders were divided in their opinions on the efficiency of the structure, with many

¹⁰ Section [125.901](#), *F.S.* The eight Florida counties whose children's services councils have independent taxing authority are Broward, Hillsborough, Martin, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, Pinellas, St. Lucie, and Okeechobee.

¹¹ These are Broward, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade/Monroe, and St. Lucie.

¹² Florida's Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) plan with the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services makes early learning coalitions responsible for generating private donations to meet federal working poor matching requirements. These matching requirements are established each year in Florida's General Appropriations Act. In 2006-07, specific appropriation 2304, Ch. [2006-025](#), *Laws of Florida*, required a match from local sources for working poor eligible participants of 6% on childcare slots.

citing duplicative reporting and oversight. Respondents also cited a need for improving communication and training, and resolving several issues related to local coalition boards.

To assess the program’s local governance structure, we conducted in-depth field visits to seven coalitions, reviewed program documents, and interviewed key staff, board members, program providers, and other local stakeholders.¹³ In addition, to obtain a statewide perspective on project issues, we distributed a written questionnaire to early education stakeholders including coalition executive directors, board chairs and members, program providers, school districts, children’s service councils, and state agency administrators. At our request, questionnaire respondents distributed the instrument to other knowledgeable early education parties. In total, we received 150 questionnaire responses.¹⁴

The local governance structure provides coalitions with flexibility and stakeholder involvement to meet the early education needs of local communities

The current governance structure for early education programs has two main strengths: it provides flexibility to adapt to local conditions and helps ensure broad-based community involvement in key policy decisions and oversight activities.

The governance structure enables coalitions to establish delivery systems based on resource availability and other local conditions. A primary benefit of the current governance structure is that it provides flexibility to address local conditions. The structure acknowledges differences across the state in the demand for early education services, the number and distribution of resources such as early education providers and funding, and the capacity of coalitions and/or contract service providers to provide administrative services.

¹³ The seven early learning coalitions we visited were Broward, Duval, Gateway (which serves Columbia, Hamilton, Lafayette, Suwannee, and Union counties), Heartland (which serves Charlotte, DeSoto, Hardee, and Highlands counties), Hillsborough, Miami-Dade/Monroe, and Northwest (which serves Bay, Calhoun, Franklin, and Gulf counties).

¹⁴ The intention of the questionnaire was to maximize stakeholder input. Thus, while questionnaire responses provide valuable stakeholder insights on early education issues, the responses should not be used to make generalizations about the opinions of any individual stakeholder group without additional information.

Local coalitions have used this flexibility to establish different service delivery models. For instance, some coalitions contract for many or all services such as resource and referral, eligibility determination, program enrollment, monitoring, records processing, and payment processing, while other coalitions perform these functions in-house or contract for only selected services. Exhibit 7 shows these differences among the early learning coalitions.

**Exhibit 7
Early Learning Coalitions Use Different Service Delivery Methods**

Delivery Model	Number of Coalitions	Percentage Using Model
Mixture of Services Provided In-House and Contracted Out	7	23%
Coalition Provides Most Services In-House	9	29%
Coalition Contracts Out Most Services	15	48%
Total	31	100%

Source: Agency for Workforce Innovation.

For example, the Early Learning Coalition of Florida’s Heartland reported that it saved approximately \$600,000 in 2006-07 by providing previously contracted services in-house for the four counties it serves—Charlotte, DeSoto, Hardee, and Highlands. In contrast, the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County contracts with the Hillsborough County School District for most administrative services.

The governance structure provides a mechanism for community input, coordination, and oversight. A second primary benefit of the current governance structure is that it provides broad-based stakeholder involvement in decision-making and oversight. Florida law requires each local coalition to have a board composed of a broad range of local stakeholders including business leaders, educators, health department officials, regional workforce officials, and representatives from major children’s organizations.¹⁵ At least one-third of coalition board members must be from private sector businesses. These coalition boards provide a mechanism for community input, coordination, and program oversight at the local level. While the boards of the seven coalitions we visited varied in their composition and functions, they provided direction and

¹⁵ Section 411.01(5)(a)6., F.S.

accountability for the daily activities of coalition staff members and contract service providers.

Stakeholders in the coalitions we visited generally believed that the coalition boards were an essential component of the local governance structure for early education programs. Board members reported that they were particularly focused on minimizing administration costs and maximizing the number of children receiving services. The boards regularly scrutinized coalition finances and assessed whether it would be less costly to provide services in-house or via contract. Since boards manage coalitions differently and operate using different models, cost-saving strategies varied across coalitions.

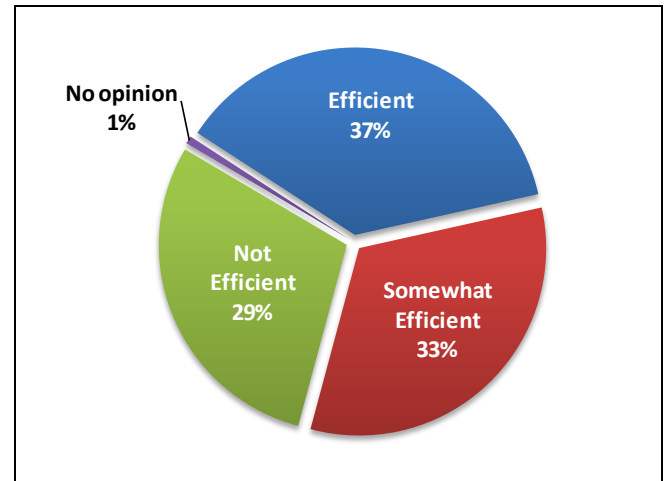
Some coalition boards reported implementing improved procurement and contracting practices to reduce costs. For example, the Early Learning Coalition Board for Northwest Florida directed staff to study coalition services and develop unit costs for program services. The coalition established unit costs for determining family eligibility, child health screening, and provider recruitment and contract execution. The coalition has included these costs in its invitations to bid, which enables bidders to know in advance what the coalition is willing to pay for services and aids the coalition in monitoring these contracts.

Stakeholders had divided opinions on the efficiency of the governance structure

Stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire were divided in their opinions on the efficiency of the local governance structure established for the state's early education programs. As shown in Exhibit 8, a plurality of respondents (37%) believed the local structure is efficient. Slightly smaller percentages reported that the program structure was somewhat efficient, or inefficient.

Respondent opinions varied considerably based on their program roles. Most coalition executive directors and board chairs/members believed that the current local governance structure is efficient. In contrast, the majority of both contract service providers and private childcare providers responding to our questionnaire indicated that the structure was not efficient. School district employees were divided with respect to the efficiency of the current local level governance structure, with the largest proportion indicating that the current structure is not efficient.

Exhibit 8 Stakeholders Were Divided in Their Opinions on the Efficiency of the Local Governance Structure



Note: There were 150 stakeholders that responded to this question.
Source: OPPAGA analysis of questionnaire results.

Overall, stakeholder opinions did not correspond to actual coalition spending on administration and program support. For instance, respondents who believed coalitions are efficient were not necessarily from coalitions that spent a relatively small percentage of their funds on administration and program support activities. Conversely, those who believed coalitions to be inefficient were almost evenly distributed across coalitions with high, average, and low percentages of spending on these activities.

Inefficiencies and duplication in monitoring were frequently cited, but are generally the result of state requirements to ensure that programs are implemented consistent with state and federal requirements. The most frequently reported areas of local program inefficiency related to data collection, monitoring, and reporting. Most of these activities are required by the state to ensure that early education programs are implemented in line with state and federal requirements. While questionnaire respondents acknowledged the need for state oversight, they said that these reviews were time consuming and often duplicative. The Agency for Workforce Innovation is working with applicable state and local agencies to reduce the burden that these audits and reviews placed on local coalitions and providers.¹⁶

¹⁶ For more information, refer to *The Governance Structure of Florida's Early Education Programs Presents Some Administrative Challenges*, OPPAGA Report No. 08-35, June 2008.

However, other oversight activities appear to be the result of locally initiated requirements. When the Agency for Workforce Innovation initially proposed rules that would have required coalitions to monitor providers for adherence with health and safety standards, many local coalitions began developing these standards in anticipation of the agency's final directive. After providers asserted that such rules would duplicate the Department of Children and Families' childcare facility inspections, the Agency for Workforce Innovation dropped this requirement from its proposed rule. However, the agency did not prohibit the coalitions from using their local standards to monitor program providers. As a result, monitoring by some coalitions duplicates, to some degree, the Department of Children and Families' health and safety inspections of childcare centers.

Stakeholders cited the need for improved communication and training. Stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire also frequently cited inefficiencies and duplication in information dissemination and training. Over half of the school district personnel, contract service providers, and private childcare providers who responded to our questionnaire reported that inconsistent program direction is a problem at the local level. For example, some childcare providers reported that they may get directives and information from multiple contractors as well as their local coalition due to the lack of clarification about what entity will disseminate information.

Confusion about program information and assistance sources partly stems from the changes in the local governance structure over time. Prior to the creation of the current program structure in 1999, central agencies contracted directly with the state for the local management of subsidized childcare services. Over the years, some central agencies developed a long-term presence in local communities and established relationships with parents and childcare providers. In 1999, the Florida Legislature restructured the state's early learning programs at the local level by creating coalitions to plan and implement a comprehensive program of readiness services.¹⁷ However, many coalitions continued to contract for administration and program support services with the central agencies, which are now called contract service providers.

This has resulted in confusion among some childcare centers about the source of program information and assistance. The 2004 merger of some coalitions in response to legislation aimed at increasing the number of children each coalition serves may have added to the existing confusion among providers.¹⁸

Staff at the coalitions we visited identified steps they have taken to address this problem and improve communication and information dissemination. For instance, in response to provider concerns and the results of a communications audit, the Early Learning Coalition of Northwest Florida implemented monthly meetings that include early education providers, and it publishes a regular newsletter. The coalition also publishes a calendar to ensure that parents are informed of important events and key dates. Similarly, the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe has instituted regular meetings for providers which it co-chairs with the county, the coalition's contract service provider. Likewise, the Hillsborough Early Learning Coalition has worked with other early education community organizations to publish a coordinated newsletter to reduce conflicting and duplicative information. Several coalitions reported implementing outreach strategies to improve their relationships with providers and to increase provider participation at board meetings.

Stakeholders identified several issues related to local coalition boards. Over half (77, or 51%) of the 150 stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire asserted that the current coalition board membership requirements negatively affect the boards' ability to fulfill their responsibilities. This perception was generally spread across the stakeholder groups that responded to our questionnaire. Respondents most often raised concerns that some board members do not have sufficient knowledge about early education issues and program requirements, certain board members are not permitted to vote on important issues, and some coalitions have difficulty conducting business due to the poor attendance of board members.

Of the respondents that raised concerns about coalition boards, almost half (37, or 48%) raised concerns about the board composition, including that some board members lacked sufficient knowledge of early childhood issues. Executive

¹⁷ Chapter [99-357](#), *Laws of Florida*.

¹⁸ Chapter [2004-484](#), *Laws of Florida*.

directors we interviewed during our site visits generally believed that their boards benefitted from the managerial and financial expertise of appointed chairs and other members selected from the business community. However, they indicated that these individuals can face a steep learning curve especially in understanding early childhood issues, complex federal program requirements, and Florida's Government-in-the-Sunshine Law.

To address this issue, the Agency for Workforce Innovation requires coalitions to train board members, and began contracting with Western Kentucky University in November 2005 to provide board member training that includes information on topics such as Sunshine laws and other relevant legislation, conducting meetings, and committee structures. This training is available free upon request.¹⁹ During Fiscal Year 2007-08, the university provided five on-site board training sessions and provided technical assistance to boards throughout the contract period. Technical assistance consisted of phone conversations and email communications.

About a third of the respondents who raised concerns about coalition boards indicated that the provision of Florida law that prohibits certain board members, such as school district and provider representatives, to vote on board policy impeded local board effectiveness.²⁰ Several respondents indicated that these persons have the most in-depth knowledge of early education issues. However, a rationale for this prohibition, which the Legislature enacted in 2004, is that these provider representatives can have a vested interest in maintaining the current delivery system and could delay program changes and erode public confidence in board decisions.²¹ The Florida Legislature enacted the current voting restrictions to prevent such conflicts of interest from occurring.

A few (16, or 11%) respondents raised concerns over board member absences and noted that some coalitions have challenges in attaining a quorum necessary to conduct board meetings. These

respondents attributed attendance problems to the 2004 change in voting privileges, which they asserted has decreased the incentive for some board members to attend meetings, and to the distance some board members in coalitions covering multiple counties must travel to attend the meetings. To help address attendance issues, the 2008 Legislature amended Florida law to allow coalition boards to conduct business by telecommunication.²²

What alternatives could the Legislature consider to the current local governance structure?

There are several options the Legislature could consider if it wished to change the local governance structure for early education programs. We assessed four primary governance options.

- **Option 1** – Maintain the current local-level governance.
- **Option 2** – Eliminate coalitions and assign their responsibilities to other local entities.
- **Option 3** – Eliminate coalition boards and assign their responsibilities to the Agency for Workforce Innovation.
- **Option 4** – Change the number of Early Learning Coalitions.

Appendix B summarizes the four options and their potential advantages and disadvantages.

As shown in Exhibit 9, there was no consensus among questionnaire respondents regarding these options. The largest percentage of respondents (39%) preferred no change to the local-level governance structure, and only 33% of respondents supported eliminating early learning coalitions. Support for individual options generally mirrored the respondent's role in the current system. For example, most coalition executive directors favored no changes to the current governance structure, while a majority of both contract service providers and school district employees advocated eliminating the local coalitions.

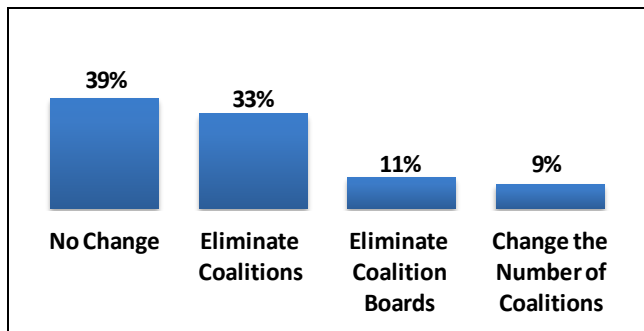
¹⁹ The Quality Initiative contract with Western Kentucky University allows coalitions to access board strategic planning and tailor board training to the specific needs of each coalition.

²⁰ Chapter [2004-484](#), *Laws of Florida*.

²¹ For more information, refer to *School Readiness Program's Potential Not Realized With Critical Issues Unresolved*, OPPAGA [Report No. 02-07](#), January 2002 (page 13) and *School Readiness Program's Potential Is Beginning to Be Realized, But Is Hindered by Partnership Guidance Issues*, OPPAGA [Report No. 04-06](#), January 2004 (page 21).

²² Chapter [2008-196](#), *Laws of Florida*.

Exhibit 9
None of the Four Governance Options Gained the Support of a Majority of Questionnaire Respondents



Note: A total of 93 stakeholders responded to the questions in our instrument on governance options. Some respondents indicated a preference for more than one option. Fifteen individuals provided feedback but indicated no preference among the four options.
 Source: OPPAGA analysis of questionnaire results.

Option 1: Maintain the current local governance structure

Under this option, Florida would continue to assign local responsibility for the state’s early education programs to the early learning coalitions. This option was favored by 39% of the stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire, and it was supported by most (17 of 23, or 74%) of the coalition executive directors who expressed a preference for one of the options.

Based on the responses of those who favored this option, we identified several potential advantages associated with maintaining the current structure. These included providing local control in early education policy making and resource allocation and flexibility to meet varying local needs. In addition, this option may help promote local accountability and allows for competitive contract procurement to maximize limited resources. Finally, maintaining the current structure may avoid the need to reorganize existing staff and resources, which could disrupt program services.

Respondents who did not favor this option asserted that maintaining the current structure increases administration costs due to the involvement of both the coalitions and contract service providers in the delivery of early education services.

Option 2: Eliminate coalitions

Under this option, the coalitions would be eliminated and their duties would be assumed by either contract service providers (the former central

agencies) or local school districts. This option was favored by 33% of the stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire, including a majority (28 of 47) of the school district employees and contract service providers who expressed a preference in their response.

Some survey respondents indicated that having contract service providers assume the current role of coalitions has the potential to better utilize the expertise of contract service providers that have longstanding experience and established relationships with local childcare providers. In addition, this option has the potential to improve communication and program direction by reducing the number of entities at the local level involved in administering the program, and may streamline processes and possibly result in lower administration costs.

However, this option may weaken local control and flexibility in early education policymaking and resource allocation, diminish state and local accountability by eliminating the oversight activities currently performed by coalitions, and reduce stakeholder and community participation. Eliminating coalitions may also result in short-term disruptions in policy direction and uncertainties during transition which could cause a disruption of program services.

Respondents who supported the concept of school districts assuming the responsibilities currently assigned to early learning coalitions were generally school district employees. These persons asserted that giving school districts lead responsibility for coordinating early education services would improve policy direction and communication and provide increased focus on the program’s educational component. These respondents also asserted that this alternative would produce cost savings by using the existing infrastructure of public schools.

However, some school districts may not have the capacity or desire to take on these duties and such a change could create reorganization costs and short-term disruptions as programs, staff, and resources are transferred. Furthermore, some school districts may not have as much expertise and experience as the current early learning coalitions in working with children from birth to age five and their parents to ensure that children are developmentally ready for kindergarten. In addition, some school districts lack working relationships with private

childcare providers and would need to establish new contracting and monitoring responsibilities. Finally, this option has the potential to reduce local stakeholder involvement, flexibility to address local conditions, and the focus on workforce aspects of the School Readiness Program.

Option 3: Eliminate coalition boards

Under this option, coalition boards would be eliminated and the Agency for Workforce Innovation would provide policy direction and direct oversight of coalition staff. Relatively few (11%) of the stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire supported this option. Eliminating the boards may reduce the challenges experienced by some coalitions related to board operations discussed earlier in this report. The potential disadvantages of this option include the loss of local-level oversight and accountability resulting in the need for increased state-level monitoring, and reduced local control and community participation in early education policymaking and resource allocation.

Option 4: Change the number of coalitions

Under this option, the Legislature would mandate either decreasing or increasing the number of early learning coalitions. Few (9%) stakeholders who responded to our questionnaire favored this option.

Reducing the number of coalitions may result in lower administration costs through economies of scale, standardizing services, and reducing the number of local entities involved in administering the program. However, consolidating coalitions may also result in a decrease in local control and community involvement and could disrupt the

continuity of administrative services during the transition period.

Increasing the number of coalitions has the potential to increase local control and involvement. However, splitting some of the current coalitions may result in higher administration costs and, thus, less money to serve children as well as a disruption of services during the transition period.

Recommendations

Although coalitions spent an average of 9.5% of their funds to administer and provide program support to early education programs in 2006-07, the amount individual coalitions allocated to these activities varied greatly. While several factors likely contribute to these differences, it is not clear whether individual coalitions could improve their efficiency and increase the level of funding they allocate to services to children and families without more in-depth analysis of their management operations. Therefore, we recommend that the Agency for Workforce Innovation work with coalitions to identify ways that coalitions with relatively high administration and program support costs might be able to reduce these costs and, thus, maximize services to children and their families.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Agency for Workforce Innovation to review and respond. The agency's written response can be viewed on page 17.

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

Florida Monitor: www.oppaga.state.fl.us

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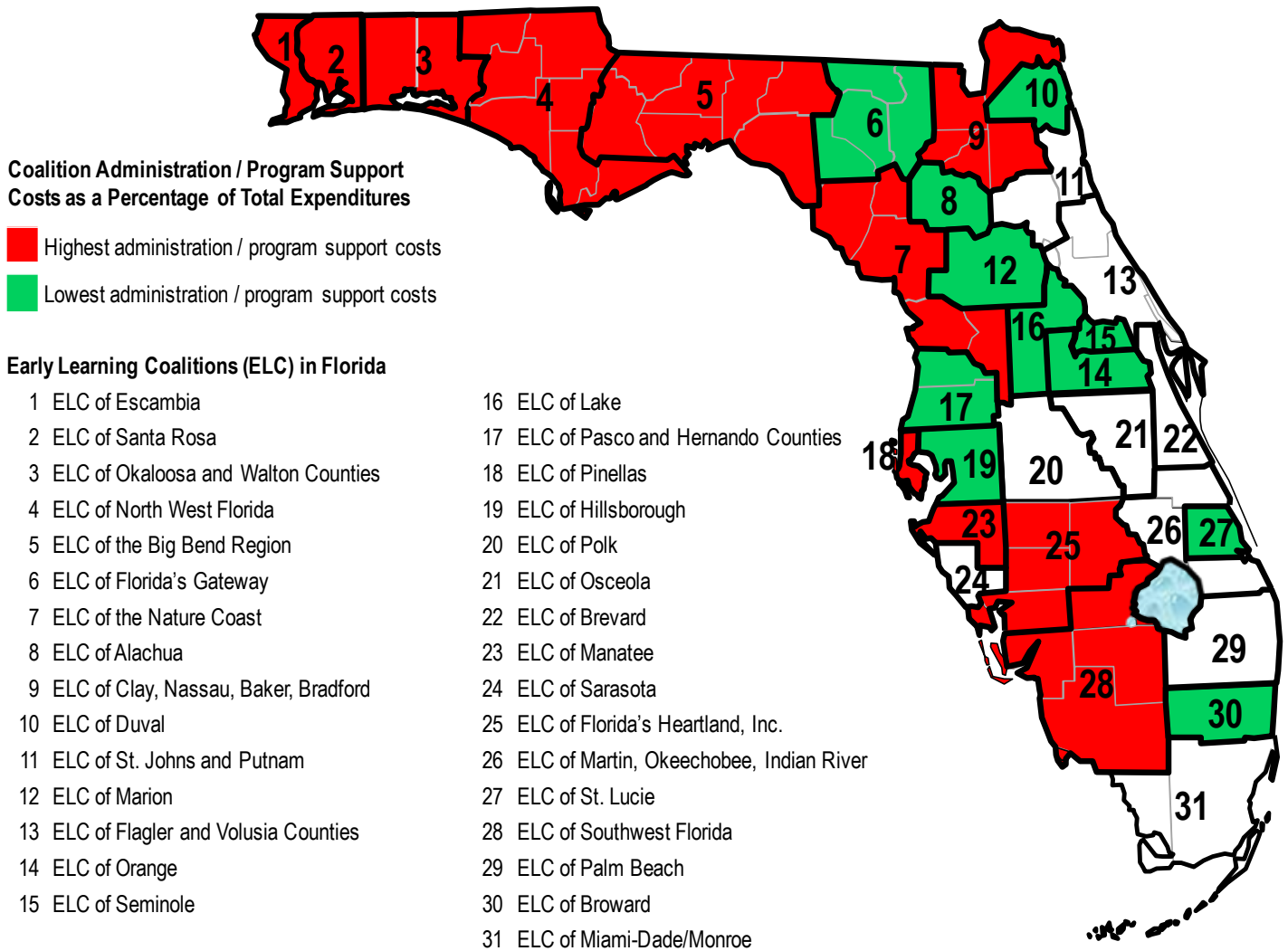
Gary R. VanLandingham, Ph.D., OPPAGA Director

Appendix A

Administration and Program Support Spending by Coalition

Table A-1 identifies those coalitions that spent the highest and lowest percentage of funds on administration and program support activities in 2006-07. The 11 coalitions that reported spending the largest percentage of their total early education funds in 2006-07 on administration and program support activities (shown in red) were primarily located in the Florida panhandle and southwest region of the state. Coalitions whose administration and program support costs were at the state average (no shading) or below (shown in green) tended to serve smaller geographic areas in the state’s more populated urban and suburban centers.

Table A-1
Coalitions in the Panhandle and Southwest Region of the State
Spent a Higher Percentage of Funds on Administration and Program Support Activities



Source: The Agency for Workforce Innovation and OPPAGA analysis.

Appendix B

Early Education Program Governance Options

OPPAGA assessed four primary governance structure options for the early education program. Table B-1 outlines the four options and their variations, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of each model based on our analysis of early education stakeholder responses to our surveys. A total of 93 stakeholders responded to the questions in our instrument on governance options. Respondents included coalition executive directors, board chairs and members, program providers, school districts, children’s service councils, and state agency administrators.

**Table B-1
Changing the Current Local Governance Structure Has Potential Advantages and Disadvantages**

Option	Potential Advantages	Potential Disadvantages
Option 1 – Keep the current local-level governance structure and allow coalitions to evolve according to local needs		
Implementation Alternatives		
Make no structural changes and allow improvements to fit local conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does not require reorganization of existing staff and resources, additional infrastructure costs, or realigning lines of authority ▪ Will not disrupt day-to-day administrative services; provides continuity ▪ Provides local control in early education policy making and resource allocation; provides the flexibility to meet varying, changing local needs/demands ▪ Fosters and relies on community partnerships, grassroots support ▪ Preserves the local accountability that coalitions currently provide ▪ Encourages competitive contract procurement for the best use of limited resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication and board challenges experienced by some coalitions may persist ▪ Less standardization of services across the state because of focus on local needs and conditions; complicating operations across multiple coalitions and making cross-coalition comparisons difficult ▪ Continues the perception among some stakeholders that administration costs are too high due to the involvement of two entities, coalitions and contract service providers, in the delivery of early education services at the local level
Option 2 – Eliminate coalitions		
Implementation Alternatives		
Eliminate all coalitions and have the state contract directly with contract service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some contract service providers have long-standing expertise in services currently provided of coalitions ▪ Could improve communication and direction by removing an administrative entity at the local level ▪ Could streamline processes and potentially reduce costs by consolidating local administrative functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May reduce local control and community participation in early education policymaking and resource allocation ▪ May disrupt longstanding private-public partnerships in some local communities ▪ Changes in policy direction as a result of realignment may cause frustration at the local level, potentially disrupting or reducing the quality of services ▪ Loss of an oversight entity at the coalition level would require increased state-level oversight ▪ Could result in a period of transition, possible disruption of day-to-day administrative services and potential uncertainty at the local level ▪ Some contract service providers may lack the capacity or desire to take on this function ▪ There may be areas of the state where no contract service providers are available ▪ May reduce system transparency because private contract service providers are not subject to the same reporting, procurement, and expenditure requirements as early learning coalitions

Option	Potential Advantages	Potential Disadvantages
Eliminate all coalitions and have the state contract directly with school districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Could improve communication and direction by removing an administrative entity at the local level ▪ Could streamline processes and potentially reduce costs by consolidating local administrative functions; school districts may be able to absorb non-program-related support functions ▪ May strengthen the education component of early education programs ▪ Could unify most education programs serving children ages 0-12 at the local level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has the potential to de-emphasize the workforce component of early education programs ▪ May reduce local control and community participation in early education policymaking and resource allocation ▪ School districts would need to acquire expertise in early education issues for children ages 0-5 ▪ School districts would have to develop procedures and relationships to work with private childcare providers ▪ Requires reorganizing existing staff and resources, and realigning lines of authority which may result in a period of transition, possible disruption of day-to-day administrative services and potential uncertainty at the local level ▪ May disrupt longstanding private-public partnerships in some local communities ▪ Changes in policy direction as a result of realignment may cause frustration at the local level, potentially disrupting or reducing the quality of services ▪ Some local school districts may lack the capacity or desire to take on this function ▪ Loss of an oversight entity at the coalition level would require increased state-level oversight ▪ Would increase the number of local entities involved in the administration of the program from 31 to 67
Option 3 – Eliminate coalition boards		
Implementation Alternative		
Eliminate coalition boards and assign their responsibilities to the Agency for Workforce Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Would eliminate board challenges experienced by some coalitions ▪ Possible cost savings from elimination of board expenses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loss of an oversight entity at the coalition level would require increased state-level oversight ▪ May reduce local control and community participation in early education policymaking and resource allocation
Option 4 – Change the number of Early Learning Coalitions		
Implementation Alternatives		
Reduce the number of early learning coalitions/create regional coalitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Could reduce administration costs by eliminating the number of entities at the local level involved in administering the program ▪ May take advantage of economies of scale by having each coalition serve larger numbers of children and families ▪ May enhance standardization/consistency across the state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Larger coalitions may not be able to tailor services as well to meet varying, changing local needs/demands ▪ May disrupt longstanding private-public partnerships in some local communities ▪ Could result in a period of transition, possible disruption of day-to-day administrative services and potential uncertainty and frustration at the local level
Increase the number of early learning coalitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Smaller coalitions may be able to better tailor services to meet varying, changing local needs/demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Could increase administration costs by increasing the number of entities at the local level involved in administering the program ▪ May reduce economies of scale by having each coalition serve fewer numbers of children and families ▪ May disrupt longstanding private-public partnerships in some local communities ▪ Could result in a period of transition, possible disruption of day-to-day administrative services and potential uncertainty and frustration at the local level



Charlie Crist
Governor
Monesia T. Brown
Director

October 20, 2008

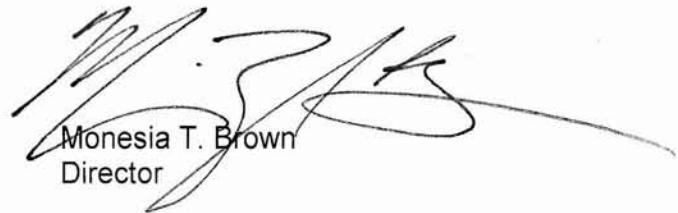
Gary R. VanLandingham, Ph.D., Director
Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
The Florida Legislature
111 West Madison, Room 312
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475

Dear Dr. VanLandingham:

We extend our thanks to you and your staff for your work on behalf of the early learning programs in our state. We appreciate the time and effort spent on this important review.

Attached, please find our response to your report entitled: "*Early Learning Coalitions' Administration and Program Support Expenses Vary Widely; Opinions Divided on Coalition Efficiency.*" If you have questions or require additional information, please contact James F. Mathews, our Inspector General at 245-7141.

Sincerely,



Monesia T. Brown
Director

Attachment

Agency for Workforce Innovation

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Charlie Crist
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Monesia T. Brown
Director

As the lead agency for Florida's early learning programs, the Agency for Workforce Innovation (Agency) welcomes recommendations and suggestions to enhance program administration. The Agency appreciates the thoroughness of the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) in analyzing Florida's vitally important early learning system.

OPPAGA's report on the local governance structure of Florida's early learning programs highlights the importance of early learning for Florida's children, families and communities. The Agency's partnership with the local early learning coalitions strengthens our ability to coordinate a comprehensive early learning system and to improve programs and services for Florida's children at the statewide level while maintaining a structure uniquely responsive to needs of local communities.

The Agency for Workforce Innovation provides the following response to OPPAGA's report.

I. Early Learning Coalitions Operate within State and Federal Expectations for Spending

In this review, OPPAGA reports a total of 9.5 percent was expended in 2006-07 for administration *and program support*. The OPPAGA calculations represent expenditure categories which are significantly different from those mandated by federal and state guidelines. The expenditure categories used by the coalitions reflect not only federal guidelines but the expectation that the school readiness program should enhance the early learning *system* for all parents and children.

As the lead agency charged with implementing the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), the Agency for Workforce Innovation is responsible for the quality, availability, and affordability of child care in Florida (45 C.F.R. §98.1). Similarly, chapter 411 of the Florida Statutes clearly requires the Agency to work toward a comprehensive early learning system that improves the quality of child care throughout the state. To meet these requirements, the Agency and the early learning coalitions partner to provide families with support for child care as well as many other services such as Child Care Resource and Referral, family education and counseling, and screenings for children. These services, which OPPAGA calls program support, are not simply administrative functions but are important services provided directly to families in our programs.

In its report, OPPAGA classifies all expenditures as 1) "slots" or money spent directly on child care, 2) quality activities, or 3) administration and program support. OPPAGA notes that reporting expenditures in the manner required by federal and state guidelines could lead to confusion and could create concerns that the coalitions are not transparent in their reporting (Report page 4, column 2). The Agency disagrees with the concern that coalitions are not transparent and with OPPAGA's combination of expenditure categories, which is contrary to federal guidelines.

Agency for Workforce Innovation

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Contrary to the report and as evidenced by the ready availability of expenditure information, coalitions are reporting in accordance with established federal requirements. Moreover, although School Readiness and the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Programs (VPK) have different reporting structures that can complicate an analysis of spending, it is important to note that the early learning coalitions are in compliance with federal and state regulations, expending 5 percent or less on administration.

Furthermore, the Agency is deeply concerned that creating a new system of definitions which combines expenditures for program support and for administration may increase confusion as to the nature of services offered directly to families through program support expenditures. Program support expenditures have been defined by the federal government as an integral part of service delivery and are distinct from administration. These expenditures directly impact families and children, and without them the Agency cannot fulfill its duties under the State CCDF Plan or chapter 411, Florida Statutes. The Agency commends OPPAGA for recognizing the reporting differences between the School Readiness and VPK programs but emphasis should be placed on the fact that program support activities are direct services to families, distinct from administrative costs, and are needed to ensure that children and families receive the services to which they are entitled. In this respect, the OPPAGA report leads to a misunderstanding that funds being used to directly benefit children and families are inappropriately being used for administrative purposes.

II. Early Learning Coalitions are Responsible for Providing a Comprehensive System of Early Learning and Care

Together, the Agency and the local coalitions utilize limited funds to meet the expectations established for each program under the Agency's jurisdiction in ways that are responsive to the needs of Florida's families, are easy-to-access and free of duplication, and promote the goals of family involvement in preparation for school success throughout a child's early years. Both the federal government and Florida's Legislature have tasked the Agency with the development and implementation of an early learning system. This duty encompasses far more than simply maximizing the number of child care slots available. Rather, it is a mandate to improve quality, affordability, and accessibility as well as support and educate parents. Within Florida's structure, the Agency works in partnership with local early learning coalitions to encourage community development, program development, and service implementation to ensure children achieve future educational success and become productive members of society.

To develop and implement a comprehensive early learning system, coalitions provide a variety of services to families and providers as program support services. Eligibility determination, for example, is a basic program support service offered at the local level. Coalitions also supply information on child care options, quality of providers, and other resources available to families. They provide guidance for parents to help them improve parenting skills and to reinforce the importance of a parent as the child's first teacher, and offer training and technical assistance to providers so that at-risk children are served appropriately.

Administration of the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program directly aligns with the responsibility of improving quality statewide (Art. IX, § 1(b), Florida Constitution). Offered to all four-year-old children in Florida, the VPK program emphasizes high-quality early education experiences to help prepare children for school, but it often is not the only early learning service a family needs. When parents enroll their children in the VPK program they also receive an array of support services through the Child Care Resource and Referral Program. In addition, eligible families

may receive financial assistance through the School Readiness Program for portions of the day when VPK is not in session. Similarly, when families seek assistance in finding child care solutions for their families, they are informed that VPK may be an option.

III. Florida has a Unique Approach to Meeting the Needs of our Many and Diverse Communities

With the adoption of the School Readiness Act in 1999, Florida became one of the first states in the nation to focus on the needs of children and families through local empowerment. Florida's early learning governance structure is based on the knowledge that local institutions and partners have more expertise regarding their communities and are best able to manage local programs and services. In a state as large and diverse as Florida, local early learning coalitions are best suited to identify needs and provide resources and supports specifically designed for their local constituents. Early learning coalition boards establish priorities for serving their communities, select delivery systems based on resource availability, minimize administrative costs based on community strengths, and build partnerships with community stakeholders (Report page 9, column 1).

The report notes variance in the administration and program support costs from coalition to coalition. In large part, this is a direct reflection of the individual needs of the communities served and serves to reinforce the logic behind utilizing locally directed program services. As OPPAGA reports, the coalitions with the greatest percentage of administration and program support expenditures are primarily located in the Florida panhandle and southwest region of the state where early learning coalitions serve less populated, rural counties (Report page 6, column 2). In urban communities, competition naturally drives the quality of services and availability of resources to meet the state and federal mandates. In rural communities, on the other hand, early learning coalitions often must develop strategies for bridging gaps to provide a comprehensive service delivery system.

More importantly, coalition expenditures vary based not only on geographic size and population density but also on the needs of the local community. For example, in some areas quality child care is abundant, but in other areas of the state the number and quality of child care providers are limited. Those early learning coalitions must devote additional funds to help providers improve quality services. The difference between coordinating efforts of established providers versus designing a system to improve quality services can significantly impact the administrative and program service delivery and costs.

The Agency commends OPPAGA for identifying the many regional differences and for acknowledging that the efficiency of each coalition cannot be determined precisely by comparing them to their counterparts in other locations (Report page 8, column 1). The report offers many worthy examples of how individual coalitions tailor their delivery systems to meet the needs of their local communities (Report page 11, column 1).

IV. Conclusion

Early learning coalitions operate as the state's local delivery systems of early learning programs, meeting the needs of the local community and providing comprehensive services for children and families. The coalitions serve as a lifeline allowing families to access much-needed services and guidance related to quality early learning programs. The services offered to families, including Child Care Resource and Referral, VPK, and School Readiness, are specifically coordinated at the local level so that families in each community have access to appropriate options for care without duplication, overlap, frustration or waste.

The OPPAGA report highlights many of the positive attributes of the local governance structure and identifies opportunity for further review. The Agency for Workforce Innovation strongly believes that through analysis and review we are better able to determine how to collectively meet the state's need for comprehensive early learning services with the highest level of efficient stewardship and transparent accountability. The mission of providing a quality early learning system is understandably complex, and it is vitally essential to the development of Florida's children, families, businesses, and communities.