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Report No. 10-57

# Steps Taken to Improve the VPK Program; Additional Actions Needed To Increase Program Accountability

## *at a glance*

The Department of Education has taken steps to address several accountability issues identified in our 2008 report on the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program. The department has increased information on screening requirements given to providers, improved data record matching, and improved the timeliness of the release of provider readiness ratings. However, the department should take additional steps to strengthen program accountability by annually reporting the percentage of kindergarten students who meet all state readiness measures and by including this percentage in its provider rating methodology.

## Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Education in response to a 2008 OPPAGA report.<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

<sup>2</sup> *61% of Voluntary Prekindergarten Children Are Ready for Kindergarten; Accountability Process Needs Improvement*, OPPAGA [Report No. 08-23](#), April 2008.

## Background

Since September 2005, Florida has offered a free, Voluntary Prekindergarten Education (VPK) Program for four-year-old children. The program is intended to provide developmentally appropriate services that increase children's chances of achieving future educational success. In the 2009-10 school year, 156,824 children enrolled in the VPK Program. The Legislature appropriated \$404 million to the program for Fiscal Year 2010-11.

The program is administered by three state agencies and local early learning coalitions. The Agency for Workforce Innovation has primary responsibility for program coordination and administration, while the Department of Education is primarily responsible for developing educational standards and measuring program outcomes. In addition, the Department of Children and Families oversees licensing of child care centers, including VPK providers. The state's 31 local early learning coalitions coordinate and implement the program in their service areas.

Our 2008 report found that children who attended the VPK Program generally had higher kindergarten readiness rates than children who did not attend the program.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the department was following the process outlined in

<sup>3</sup> Readiness rates were measured using the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS). At the time of our 2008 review, the screener included three assessments. Two of these assessments were part of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which measures sound recognition and letter naming. The third assessment, the Early Childhood Observation System (ECHOS), assesses classroom skills readiness.

s. 1002.69, *Florida Statutes*, to identify low performing VPK providers. However, there were several shortcomings in the program’s accountability process related to program outcomes, program provider readiness rates, and the cutoff scores that kindergarten children must meet to be determined ready for school.

## Current Status

The Department of Education has taken several steps to address issues raised in our previous report. However, it should take additional steps to strengthen the program’s accountability systems.

### *The department has taken steps to strengthen program accountability*

Our 2008 report noted that approximately 10% of the providers participating in the VPK Program in 2006-07 did not receive a readiness rating. Thus, these providers were not held accountable for their performance. While the department has taken steps to address this problem, the percentage of unrated providers has not materially changed over time.

The department has provided more information to nonpublic schools on the need to screen kindergarten children. The department asserted that many VPK providers did not receive accountability ratings because the children they served subsequently attended nonpublic schools and were not screened for readiness to attend kindergarten. The department must have readiness assessment data for at least four children who attended a provider’s VPK Program in the prior year to assign a readiness rating to the provider. While the department requires public schools to screen incoming kindergarten students for readiness, it does not have the authority to require nonpublic schools to conduct these screenings.<sup>4</sup>

To address this problem, the department has taken steps to better inform parents about the need to screen children who subsequently attend nonpublic kindergarten, including distributing information in newsletters and through the early learning coalitions and public schools. The department indicates that readiness screening of nonpublic kindergarten students who attended the VPK Program has increased by almost 50% compared with 2007-08 screenings.

The department has improved data record matching with the Agency for Workforce Innovation. To be included in a provider’s readiness rate, assessment data maintained by the department must be matched to enrollment files maintained by the Agency for Workforce Innovation. The department has taken steps to improve the matching process. It has stressed the need to report student identification numbers (social security numbers) to VPK providers and early learning coalitions. It also began additional data quality reviews prior to the matching process, such as checking for reasonable birth dates. In addition, the department modified its verification process to enable providers to determine whether a screening record match has been made for their students, and it requests providers to supply additional information for unmatched students. The department indicates it was able to match records for 85% of the VPK children who entered kindergarten in 2009-10 (these children completed VPK in 2008-09).

The percentage of unrated providers has remained at 10%. Despite the department’s efforts, 579 providers (approximately 10%) did not receive accountability ratings in 2010.<sup>5,6</sup> About half of these providers did not receive a rating because fewer than four of their students were matched to a kindergarten screening record. The department believes that the most common reasons that some VPK providers did not receive accountability ratings were that the children these providers served subsequently attended nonpublic schools, moved out of state, or enrolled in public schools late (readiness screenings are typically conducted during the first 30 days of the school year).

The Department of Education asserts that a primary barrier to increasing the percentage of nonpublic kindergarten students who receive readiness screenings is that Florida law does not authorize nonpublic schools to administer the full kindergarten screening tool. This tool has two parts, and the department allows nonpublic schools to administer only the behavioral assessment if their kindergarten teachers receive specified training. This assessment relies on teacher observations over a 30-day period and employs a standard checklist that teachers use to assess

<sup>5</sup> The ratings released in 2010 were based on children who entered kindergarten in 2009-10 and completed the VPK Program in 2008-09.

<sup>6</sup> The department reported that only 13 current VPK providers have never received a readiness rating in the past four years (2005-06 through 2008-09), and the majority of these providers served a small number of children.

<sup>4</sup> Florida statutes give parents the responsibility for ensuring that such screening occurs (s. 1002.69, *F.S.*).

a child’s behavioral development. The department does not allow nonpublic schools to administer the reading assessment portion of the kindergarten screening because it requires a higher level of teacher training and is sensitive to differences in its administration. However, the department indicates that some districts provide trained district personnel to go onsite to nonpublic schools in order to administer the reading assessment. According to the department, districts have reported numerous difficulties in working with nonpublic schools that administer the observational assessment and in making arrangements for the reading assessment at nonpublic schools.

Because the reading assessment is not administered at all nonpublic schools in the state, many parents of nonpublic school children must take their children to a public school to receive the full kindergarten readiness assessment. The department indicates that it is considering allowing nonpublic schools to administer the reading assessment provided that nonpublic school teachers receive training and meet other requirements to ensure proper administration of the assessment. Department officials indicate that s. 1002.69(1), *Florida Statutes*, may need to be amended to specifically authorize nonpublic schools to administer the full statewide kindergarten screening.

***The department has not reported additional information on program effectiveness***

Our prior report noted that the department’s method of reporting kindergarten readiness data—reporting readiness on each assessment measure separately—did not provide a complete picture of whether children who attended VPK were fully ready for school. Furthermore, it could result in designating providers as low performing even though a higher percentage of the children they served were determined to be fully ready for school than those served by providers not designated as low performing.<sup>7</sup> To address this issue, we recommended that the department report the percentage of children considered ‘ready’ on all measures.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For 2008-09 screening results, the department reported the percentage of kindergarten students who were ready on the classroom skills measure, the initial sound recognition measure, and the letter naming measure separately.

<sup>8</sup> Beginning in the 2008-09 school year, the department replaced the two previously used Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) measures with one new measure, the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading – Kindergarten (FAIR-K), which is aligned with VPK standards.

Most kindergarten students in 2009-10 who completed VPK in the previous year were deemed ready for school based on the two kindergarten assessment measures used (see Exhibit 1). Ninety-three percent of kindergarten students who attended VPK were deemed ready based on the classroom skills assessment and 74% were ready based on the reading assessment.

**Exhibit 1  
VPK Children Were More Likely to Be Ready on Kindergarten Assessment Measures Than Non-VPK Children in 2009-10<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Classroom Skills Assessment (ECHOS)</b> Development of language and literacy, mathematics, social and personal skills, and physical development and fitness			
	<b>VPK<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Non-VPK</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Ready	92.9%	83.3%	9.6%
Not Ready	7.1%	16.7%	
<b>Reading Assessment (FAIR-K)</b> Letter-naming and phonemic awareness			
	<b>VPK<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Non-VPK</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Ready	73.6%	54.9%	18.7%
Not Ready	26.4%	45.1%	

<sup>1</sup> Data reflects children who entered kindergarten in 2009-10 and completed the VPK Program in 2008-09.

<sup>2</sup> VPK percentages only include children who fully completed the VPK Program. Source: Department of Education.

However, it is unclear from these measures whether the children who were deemed ready on the individual measures were fully ready for kindergarten (e.g., were deemed ready on both measures). We estimate that the percentage of kindergarten students who attended VPK and passed both assessments in 2009-10 was between 66.5% and 73.6%.<sup>9</sup> Department data also shows that compared to other kindergarten students, a higher percentage of children completing the VPK Program were ready on the two current kindergarten assessment measures.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the VPK Program is successful in helping ensure that children begin kindergarten fully ready to learn.

<sup>9</sup> The percentage of children ready on both measures could not exceed the percentage of children ready on the two individual measures, setting the maximum point of the range (73.6%). The minimum point in the range cannot exceed the sum of the percentages of children deemed not ready on both measures – 33.5% (7.1% not ready on the classroom skills assessment plus 26.4% deemed not ready on the reading assessment).

<sup>10</sup> We cannot compare 2008-09 reading assessment scores on the FAIR-K assessment to 2007-08 scores because the FAIR-K assessment was first used in 2008-09.

The department has not revised its method for identifying low performing providers. Our previous report found that the department's accountability rating formula designated some providers as 'low performing' even though a higher percentage of their children were ready for school in all areas assessed than providers without this designation. This occurred because the rating formula summed the percentage of children ready on each measure individually and did not consider the percentage of children who were ready for school in both reading and classroom behavior.

The department has not implemented our recommendation to modify its methodology to address this issue. However, the department recognizes this issue and maintains that the current methodology allows for the inclusion of as many children as possible in the calculation of the accountability ratings using two distinct and separate measures. It believes that the inclusion of the two measures does result, on rare occasions, in extreme cases where a provider who scores very poorly on one measure but extremely well on the other measure might not be deemed low performing, whereas a provider with a higher percentage of children ready on both measures may be declared low performing. Because the two measures together provide an overall picture of readiness that individually neither measure could provide based on the VPK standards, the department employs its current methodology. The department agrees that it would be ideal if each student included in the provider accountability ratings were screened on both measures. However, the department maintains that the current methodology is necessary and allows for the inclusion of more assessment results in the provider accountability ratings because many children have not been screened on both measures.

The department has issued provider readiness ratings in a more timely manner. Our previous report noted that the department had not issued provider readiness ratings for the 2005-06 VPK program year until June 2007, which was too late to enable low performing providers to make needed improvements during the 2006-07 program year.<sup>11</sup> To address this issue, the department has streamlined its data analysis processes, which has enabled it to publish provider ratings earlier in the year. The department released its most recent final provider readiness rates in March 2010, for children who completed the VPK Program in 2008-09. This earlier release date enabled low performing providers to receive some assistance and support from the department before the end of the school year. The department should continue to seek ways to release accountability data as early as possible to enable providers to improve their performance during the school year.

***The department is considering modifying its classroom skills screening assessment***

Our prior report noted that while the department had evaluated the cutoff scores that students must meet on letter-naming and initial sounds measures to be considered ready for school, it had not evaluated cutoff scores for its classroom skills measure. The department reports that it is considering replacing its classroom assessment instrument in 2010-11 at the end of the current vendor's contract. If the department continues to use the current Early Childhood Observation System instrument to assess classroom readiness skills, it should periodically reevaluate the cutoff scores it uses as evidence of readiness to attend kindergarten.

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<sup>11</sup> If providers do not meet a minimum readiness rate set by the State Board of Education, they are deemed 'low performing' and are subject to sanction.

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Project supervised by David D. Summers (850/487-9257)

Project conducted by Erika Morse and Sibylle Allendorff

Tim Elwell, Education Policy Area Staff Director (850/487-9228)

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