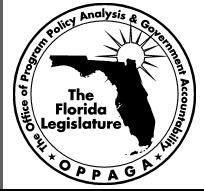




Office of Program Policy Analysis And Government Accountability



John W. Turcotte, Director

January 1999

Follow-Up Review of Early Education and Child Care Programs

Abstract

- The current early education and child care system consists of duplicative service delivery systems with varying quality and outcomes, and lacks sufficient accountability to ensure achievement of the state's school readiness goal.
- Consolidating the governance of early education and child care programs at the state level should help increase accountability, promote a more efficient use of program resources, and improve program planning.
- Any change in the governance structure for early education and child care programs should ensure local flexibility and build upon the successes of delivery systems already in place at the local level.
- Changing the governance structure for early education and child care programs will not improve school readiness unless it addresses key school readiness issues such as program quality and accountability.

Purpose

The Joint Legislative Auditing Committee directed OPPAGA to conduct a follow-up review of early education and child care programs administered by the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF).¹ The purpose of our study is to determine if changes to the governance structure of these programs will help improve school

readiness in Florida.² As such, our review has two specific objectives.

- Identify the major problems or challenges affecting school readiness under the current system for providing early education and child care programs.
- Identify alternatives to the current governance structure for early education and child care programs (organizational alternatives) and assess their potential effects on school readiness in Florida.

In the 1998 legislative session, school readiness was a major issue that was not resolved. Both houses of the Legislature proposed legislation to create a statewide system for preparing children to start school. The key issues involved the establishment of school readiness measures and the governance of the early education and child care system at the state and local level.

Background

"Readiness to Start School" is the first of Florida's eight education goals under the system of education improvement and accountability enacted by the 1991 Legislature. Section 229.591(3), F.S., establishes the school readiness goals and requires communities and schools to collaborate to prepare children and families for the children's success in school. Young children and their families currently receive school readiness services through a broad continuum of state and federal programs. These programs provide economic, health, nutritional, social, therapeutic, and educational services

¹ In December 1994, OPPAGA issued a performance review of the early education and child care programs administered by the Florida Department of Education (DOE) and the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (DHRS).

² The methodology for our review consisted of numerous interviews with state level stakeholders including department heads and program administrators, legislative staff, and representatives from relevant state level associations. We also visited eight counties and conducted discussion groups with local program administrators, interagency collaboration groups, and program providers.

necessary for a child to be physically, emotionally, and mentally ready to start school.

Recognizing that the various school readiness programs are interrelated, the Legislature has mandated interagency coordination and collaboration. The three primary collaborative efforts for early education and child care programs are: the State Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Services established pursuant to s. 411.222(4), F.S., district interagency coordinating councils established pursuant to s. 230.2305, F.S., and the Collaborative Partnership Projects that the Legislature has annually appropriated \$3 million for since 1993.

A number of publicly funded programs serving children ages birth to five include educational services as a part of their mission. Florida's Early education and child care programs include Prekindergarten Early Intervention, Florida First Start, Prekindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities, Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, Even Start Family Literacy Program, Subsidized Child Care, Migrant Pre-K, and Title I Pre-K. Each of these early education and child care programs were independently developed at different times to address specific needs of parents and their children. The three largest programs, which provided early education and child care services to approximately 170,000 children in Fiscal Year 1997-98, are described below.

Prekindergarten Early Intervention (Pre-K) Program. The Pre-K program, established pursuant to s. 230.2305, F.S., is designed to serve economically disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds in educational programs administered by Florida's 67 school districts. The program is funded by a direct appropriation of lottery dollars. School districts may spend the funds they receive to implement and conduct a Pre-K program themselves or they may contract with public or non-public entities to serve eligible children. Children typically attend Pre-K programs six hours a day, 180 days a year.

Subsidized Child Care. The state and federally funded subsidized child care program, administered through DCF, provides child care for children birth through age 12 at hours that accommodate a family's work schedule, 10 hours a day, 261 days a year. The purpose of the program, as provided for in s. 402.3015, F.S., is "to provide quality child care to enhance the

development, including language, cognitive, motor, social, and self-help skills of children who are at risk of abuse and neglect and children of low income families."

Head Start. Head Start is a federally funded program that has a dual goal of moving families out of poverty and preparing children to start school. Head Start, which primarily serves three- and four-year-olds, is designed as a comprehensive program that includes physical and mental health services, nutritional services, and services for children with disabilities. The funds are distributed from the federal government directly to local grantees.

Issues and Challenges

The current early education and child care system in Florida consists of multiple programs and agencies that were created at different times for different purposes. Each of these programs was independently designed and established to address specific needs of families and children. As a result, the current system has duplicative service delivery systems with varying quality and outcomes, and lacks sufficient accountability to ensure achievement of Goal 1, Readiness to Start School.

In recent years, with an increasing public awareness of the importance of appropriate early childhood development, there have been legislative concerns about how this multi-agency system for early education services affects school readiness. Through discussions with stakeholders at both the state and local level, we identified several major issues or challenges that limit the effectiveness of the current system.

Program quality and outcomes reportedly vary among programs due to differences in the origin and design of the programs.

The original intent and design of the subsidized child care and Pre-K programs reflect different goals and values, which reportedly have an impact on program quality. (See Exhibit 1.) Subsidized child care was designed as an economic program to promote financial self-sufficiency and life skills for low-income families, while the Pre-K and Head Start programs were designed as school readiness programs, with an emphasis on providing quality educational experiences for children.

Exhibit 1

The Three Largest Publicly Funded Early Education Programs Have Different Goals and Standards

Program	Prekindergarten Early Intervention (Pre-K)	Subsidized Child Care	Head Start
Purpose/Goals	To enable all families and children in the school district to be prepared for the children's success in school	To prepare children to enter kindergarten ready to learn and to promote financial self-sufficiency and life skills for the families of these children	To promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of low-income children
Administration	Department of Education 67 district school boards	Department of Children and Families 15 children and families districts 25 community child care coordinating agencies	61 local grantees
Funding Source	100% state - lottery	84% federal 16% state – general revenue	80% federal 20% local
Funding: Fiscal Year 1997-98	\$97.1 million	\$320.6 million	\$144.7 million
Cost/Child/Hour	\$2.96	\$1.19	\$2.56
Staff Requirement	DOE certified teacher or a Child Development Associate (CDA) with supervision from a certified teacher per classroom; others assisting the teacher or CDA must complete a 30-hour training course. ¹	Center - One Child Development Associate (CDA) per 20 children *30- hour training course for other child care personnel in centers *30-hour training course for licensed family day care homes	One teacher per Head Start classroom must have Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent
Hours of Service	6 hours per day 180 days per year	10 hours per day 261 days per year	6-12 hours per day 180-260 days per year
Children Served Fiscal Year 1997-98	30,014	111,150	29,523
Maximum Family Income	130% of federal poverty	150% of federal poverty 185% for continuation	100 % of federal poverty
Adult/Child Ratios:			
0-12 months		1:4	1:4
12-24 months		1:6	1:4
2 years old		1:11	1:4
3 years old	1:10	1:15	2:15
4-5 years old	1:10	1:20	1:10

¹ A Child Development Associate (CDA) is an individual that has successfully completed a CDA assessment and has been awarded the CDA credential. The assessment involves providing documentation of training and experience in the early childhood care profession.

Source: Florida Department of Education, Florida Department of Children and Families, Head Start State Collaboration Office, and OPPAGA analysis

Program outcomes and quality are difficult to control for many children enrolled in the subsidized child care program because of specific program requirements. Federal and state requirements stipulate that parents may choose any legal child care provider to provide their child care services.³ Parents are offered the choice to enroll their child with a child care provider that contracts with DCF or receive a child care certificate, issued directly to the parent, which may be used to pay for child care services provided by any legal provider. At the end of Fiscal Year 1997-98, 76% of the children receiving subsidized child care services were enrolled in facilities with a contractual arrangement with DCF. According to the program director for subsidized child care, DCF may impact the

school readiness of these children because it monitors and evaluates the services provided by contracted providers (i.e., curriculum). Contracted providers must meet a minimum score on their evaluation to continue their contracts. However, the ability of DCF to influence program outcomes for children receiving services through non-contracted child care providers is limited because these providers are not evaluated and may not be licensed.

Stakeholders reported that the quality of education in the subsidized child care program is not as high as in the Pre-K program for several additional reasons including less stringent teacher credentialing and larger adult-to-child ratios than are required by the Pre-K program. This has enabled the subsidized child care program to fund providers at less than half of the cost per child per hour than the Pre-K program. (See Exhibit 1.)

³ Legal providers for subsidized child care include state licensed for-profit and non-profit child care centers, exempt non-profit providers, licensed and registered family day care homes, and informal providers such as a relative or a neighborhood acquaintance.

Outcomes for the subsidized child care program also may be adversely affected because program eligibility requirements remove children from the child care setting when the parent loses eligibility. Therefore, some children may not be receiving continuous child care services. Program administrators and providers stated that an ongoing relationship with a nurturing, competent adult is a strong determinate of the effectiveness of an early childhood education program. Eligibility for both the subsidized and Pre-K programs are often determined by the parent's employment status and/or income level, rather than the child's needs. However, the Pre-K program continues to provide services throughout the school year after the initial eligibility determination, while a child enrolled in the subsidized child care program can be removed each time the parent's income or employment status changes.

The current early education and child care system provides little accountability for program outcomes or responsibility for developing a coordinated school readiness policy.

Accountability for the current early education and child care system is hindered because no single entity has sufficient authority to ensure that the system is achieving the state's school readiness goal. Recognizing that the various school readiness programs are interrelated, the legislature has mandated interagency coordination and collaboration through the State Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Services (SCC) and the district interagency coordinating councils.

Stakeholders reported that the SCC and the district interagency councils have achieved varying levels of success because they do not have sufficient authority to ensure accountability. For example, local program administrators reported an instance where the district interagency council agreed to the establishment of a single point of entry (using common program eligibility forms and combining the eligibility determination process for all programs) for early education and child care programs in the county. This single point of entry would have made it easier for families to access services. However, under the current system, the school district and DCF have fiscal and administrative control of the various programs, and the school district administration chose not to pursue the establishment of the single entry point after a change in leadership.

In addition, agencies providing early education and child care services do not have a valid and reliable

system of outcome measures to determine whether the existing programs are affecting school readiness. Beginning with school year 1996-97, DOE required that all kindergarten teachers formally observe each of their students. DOE developed an "Expectations for School Readiness Checklist" for the school districts to use as a record keeping/planning system and as the basis for assessing a student's readiness level. To meet the state's expectation of school readiness, children are required to achieve 75% or more of the expectations on the checklist. Each school district is allowed to select a commercial instrument or develop its own instrument to use in this assessment process. (See Exhibit 2 for the range of assessment instruments utilized.)

Exhibit 2
School Districts Are Utilizing a Variety of Assessment Instruments

Commercial Developed Instrument	Florida Expectations Checklist	Locally Developed Instrument	Other
21	17	23	9

Source: Annual Report of Florida's Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program.

DOE does not review each of these assessment instruments to ensure that it provides an accurate measure of the state's expectations. Furthermore, assessment results are not reliable for comparison among school districts because of the variety of assessment tools utilized.

The existence of duplicative service delivery systems for early education and child care hamper access to services and contribute to inefficient usage of program resources.

Currently, many counties have multiple eligibility determination systems that hamper access to services and reduce program efficiencies. The eligibility determination systems of these counties often require parents to submit separate applications at different sites for each early childhood program. Recognizing the need for a unified system of entry, the Legislature created the Collaborative Partnership Project grant program. An objective of the program has been to promote the development of a simplified point of entry system for each county. We found that some school districts have been able to establish a unified system of entry. The school districts that have not developed a unified system of entry reported that additional guidance from state level administrators would help to facilitate the process.

In addition, each early childhood education and child care program uses different information systems to collect and report programmatic data, which results in the development and maintenance of redundant

systems. Program administrators reported that the Pre-K, Subsidized Child Care, and Head Start programs use different information systems that do not always interface. Information system compatibility between programs would facilitate data collection and information sharing, and facilitate the evaluation of program results and outcomes. Stakeholders felt that this problem could be most effectively addressed at the state level through development of standard information system operating requirements for each early childhood program.

A final example of an inefficient program delivery system is the use of redundant screening instruments to assess a child's stage of development upon entering a program. Local program administrators reported that each of the early childhood education and care programs are using different developmental screening tools. For children who are receiving services from both the Pre-K and subsidized child care programs, this results in multiple screenings for the same purpose.

In conclusion, based on the problems and issues outlined above, the Legislature should consider options to improve the current school readiness situation in Florida. One option suggested for improving school readiness is to change the governance structure for early education and child care programs. The next section provides our assessment of alternative government structures for early education programs.

Governance Structure Alternatives

Changing the governance structure for early education and child care programs will not improve school readiness in Florida unless the key issues identified by stakeholders are addressed. We identified several alternatives to the current system that could provide a better structure for addressing many of these issues by

- **increasing accountability by establishing a single statewide governing entity responsible for all early education and child care programs;**
- **reducing state-level barriers to program effectiveness and efficiency by establishing common policies and operational standards for all programs; and**
- **maintaining local discretion and providing tools to enable local communities to build upon the successes of their current early education systems.**

Over the last several years, an issue has arisen regarding whether the current multiple-agency system for early education and child care programs is the best system for delivering early education and child care services to families and children. Based on discussions with stakeholders and a review of various proposals, we identified four alternative governance structures (including the current structure) for early education programs.

1. Maintain the current governance structure for early education and child care services.
2. Consolidate responsibility for all early education and child care programs into a new entity that would be under the direction of the Governor.⁴
3. Create a new school readiness "governing board" that would be responsible for establishing policy and direction for all early education and child care programs.
4. Transfer responsibility for all early education and child care programs to an existing agency such as the Department of Education or the Department of Children and Families.

We evaluated these alternatives based on their potential to address the problems and issues identified by stakeholders. Specifically, we assessed each alternative to determine its potential to increase accountability for early education and child care programs, improve program quality and access, improve coordination among programs, and promote a more efficient use of program resources. Exhibit 3 shows potential advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives.

⁴ The programs consolidated in Alternative Nos. 2-4 could include Prekindergarten Early Intervention, Florida First Start, Even Start Family Literacy Program, and Subsidized Child Care.

Exhibit 3
Each Alternative Governance Structure for Early Education and Child Care Programs
Has Advantages and Disadvantages

Alternative 1: Maintain the current governance structure for early education and child care programs.

<i>Description</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No changes to the way the programs are currently governed.
<i>Intended Result</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The existing structure for governing early education and child care programs is maintained.
<i>Advantages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is least disruptive to governance and service delivery. Subsidized child care is currently linked with other economic self-sufficiency programs and services provided by DCF and other child welfare programs, which results in a comprehensive look at the needs of families receiving services. Stakeholders are concerned that removing child care from DCF would fragment these economic self-sufficiency programs and make it harder for families to receive comprehensive services.
<i>Disadvantages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diffused responsibility for early education and child care programs among multiple agencies results in a lack of accountability for the overall system. Early education and child care programs are smaller parts of larger programs provided by DOE (K-12) and DCF, which diminishes the potential for school readiness to be treated as a high level state issue. The existence of multiple delivery systems may hamper access and limit the efficient use of program resources due to duplication of essential functions among programs.

Alternative 2: Create a new state-level entity under the direction of the Governor that would be responsible for all early education and child care programs.

<i>Description</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsibility for all early education and child care programs would be consolidated into a new state entity that would be under the direction of the Governor. The new entity would assume planning, policy, and rule-making responsibilities for the early education and child care programs currently administered by DOE and DCF. The staff or resources currently used by DOE and DCF in administering these programs would be transferred to the new entity.
<i>Intended Result</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased program accountability, coordination, consistency and efficiency A new and coordinated policy environment for making decisions about school readiness programs in Florida
<i>Advantages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases visibility of early education and child care programs Increases accountability for early education and child care programs because responsibility for program outcomes is vested in a single entity Increases the likelihood of timely policy development for early education programs because the responsibility is vested in a single entity or person Promotes the development of a single set of standards, eligibility requirements, and outcomes for all early education and child care programs Promotes a more efficient use of program resources by reducing the duplication of essential functions that exists with parallel delivery systems
<i>Disadvantages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could result in increased administrative costs May lose lottery dollar funding for the Pre-K program because state law requires that all lottery dollars must be administered by DOE Would fragment subsidized child care from other economic self sufficiency programs administered by DCF, which could make it harder for families to receive the comprehensive services needed to achieve family stability

(continued on next page)

Exhibit 3 (Continued)

Alternative 3: Create a new state-level "governing board" that would be responsible for establishing policy and direction for all early education and child care programs.	
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsibility for all early education and child care programs would be consolidated under the direction of a new school readiness governing board. The board could include the Commissioner of Education, the Governor, Secretary of the Department of Children and Family Services, and other members as prescribed in law. The new governing board would assume planning, policy, and rule-making responsibilities for the early education and child care programs currently administered by DOE and DCF.
Intended Result	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased program accountability, coordination, consistency and efficiency A new and coordinated policy environment for making decisions about school readiness in Florida A broad and comprehensive perspective for making policy decisions regarding school readiness programs
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases the visibility of early education and child care programs Increases accountability for early education and child care programs because responsibility for program outcomes is vested in a single entity Promotes the development of a single set of standards, eligibility requirements, and outcomes for all early education and child care programs Promotes a more efficient use of program resources by reducing the duplication of essential functions that exists with the current systems Brings a multidisciplinary approach to policy making, which could result in more comprehensive policy for early education programs
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could result in increased administrative costs because of the start-up costs associated with new entities May lose lottery dollar funding for the Pre-K program if administration of the program is removed from DOE because state law requires that all lottery dollars must be administered by DOE May reduce the likelihood of timely policy development and result in less accountability than Alternative No. 2 due to the involvement of a governing board consisting of multiple stakeholders Would fragment subsidized child care from other economic self sufficiency programs administered by DCF, which could make it harder for families to receive the comprehensive services needed to achieve family stability
Alternative 4: Transfer responsibility for all early education and child care programs to an existing agency such as the Department of Education or the Department of Children and Families.	
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsibility for all early education and child care programs would be consolidated into an existing executive branch department or agency. The selected agency would assume planning, policy, and rule-making responsibilities for the early education and child care programs currently administered by DOE and DCF.
Intended Result	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased program accountability, coordination, consistency, and efficiency
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should be less costly than creating a new entity because it does not include the start-up and administrative costs associated with a new state-level entity Increases accountability for early education and child care programs because responsibility for program outcomes is vested in a single entity Increases the likelihood of timely policy development for early education programs because the responsibility is vested in a single entity or person Promotes the development of a single set of standards, eligibility requirements, and outcomes for all early education and child care programs Promotes a more efficient use of program resources by reducing the duplication of essential functions that exists with parallel delivery systems

(continued on next page)

Exhibit 3 (Continued)

Disadvantages

- Program missions may change to fit philosophy of new administrative organization. For example, if the programs are moved to DOE, stakeholders are concerned that subsidized child care will not be treated as an economic program for working families (meaning that it would be operated more like a school program and would not be as concerned about providing full-year and full-day services). On the other hand, if all the programs are moved to DCF, stakeholders are concerned that the prekindergarten program would lose its educational focus.
- Early education and child care programs will continue to be provided by an agency that has a much broader mission, which diminishes the potential for school readiness to be treated as a priority issue.
- If all the programs are transferred to DCF, it may result in the loss of lottery dollar funding for Pre-K since state law requires that all lottery dollars must be administered by DOE.
- If the programs are transferred to DOE, it would fragment subsidized child care from other economic self sufficiency programs administered by DFC, which could make it harder for families to receive the comprehensive services needed to achieve family stability.

Source: OPPAGA staff

Each of the three alternatives that combine responsibility for the early education and child care programs into a single entity (Alternative Nos. 2-4) have the potential to provide a better structure for addressing many of the problems identified by stakeholders. At a minimum, these alternatives should increase program accountability by providing a clear line of responsibility for the overall system of early education and child care programs. In addition, combining governance of the programs at the state level should promote a more efficient use of program resources by reducing the duplication of essential functions (i.e., multiple eligibility determinations) among programs, and promote the development of a single set of standards and outcomes for all early education and child care programs. However, consolidation of these programs could result in increased administrative costs if a new entity is created, and it could fragment subsidized child care from other economic self sufficiency programs provided by DCF.

When considering the three centralization alternatives as a group, each one has advantages and disadvantages that need to be considered. Consolidating the programs into a new entity (Alternative Nos. 2 and 3) would increase the visibility of school readiness as a state issue; however, stakeholders fear that doing so would make early education and child care programs more political. Combining the programs into a new state entity underneath the Governor (Alternative No. 2) would provide clearer accountability and a more timely development of policy than a governing board (Alternative No. 3). A governing board, however, would result in the development a more comprehensive policy for early education programs because multiple disciplines and perspectives would be involved in the process. Finally, the main advantage of transferring

the programs to an existing agency (Alternative No. 4) would be minimizing costs. Stakeholders are concerned that the creation of a new entity would increase administrative costs and consequently reduce the amount of funding for direct services to families.

Other Organizational Issues

If the programs are consolidated using any of the centralization alternatives outlined above, the Legislature will need to consider some additional organizational issues identified by stakeholders. These issues are discussed below.

Should the general child care licensing function be included in the consolidation of the publicly funded early education and child care programs? If the publicly funded early education and child care programs are combined at the state level, policymakers will need to decide whether the child care licensing function should be included. Currently, the Department of Children and Families is responsible for enforcing the child care licensing standards established by the state. These licensing standards apply to all applicable types of child care providers in the state, including providers who serve families receiving subsidized child care.⁵ According to stakeholders, the major disadvantage of including child care licensing is that it could result in a possible conflict of interest because a single agency will be regulating an industry from which it is the primary purchaser of services. However, if the licensing function is not included in consolidation of programs, stakeholders are concerned

⁵ Currently, the only child care providers that must be licensed by the state are child care centers that have more than five children. Family day care homes and informal care providers are not required to be licensed by the state.

that it would fragment overall child care policy for the state because the subsidized child care program would be handled by one state level entity and the rest of child care would be regulated by another agency.

Should the state prescribe or mandate changes in the governance structure of these programs at the local level? If the programs are combined at the state level, the Legislature will need to decide whether to mandate specific changes to the governance structure at the local level. Currently, the governance structures and delivery systems for early education and child care programs at the local level vary across counties. For example, some counties have established children's services boards, pursuant to s. 125.901, F.S., while other counties have not. These boards, which have the authority to levy and collect taxes for early childhood issues, represent an important part of the governance structure in those counties where they have been established.

Stakeholders are very concerned about the possibility of prescriptive changes at the local level because they believe that their local structures have evolved over time to meet the specific needs of their communities. Furthermore, stakeholders are concerned that mandated changes at the local level could disrupt the delivery of services to families, and they indicated that any prescriptive changes to the local level governance structure should be considered after changes to the state-level governance structure have been implemented.

If the programs are consolidated into a single entity at the state level, should this entity be established as a public/private partnership or as a state entity? The establishment of a public/private partnership represents one possibility for the creation of a new state entity responsible for all early education and child care programs. Overall, the stakeholders we spoke with were not supportive of the idea of a public private partnership for early education programs. The primary disadvantage cited for a public/private partnership is the concern that such a partnership would be given too much freedom in its operations and would not be necessarily accountable or responsive to the Legislature, stakeholders, program providers, and families. However, a public/private partnership would have the freedom to be creative in addressing problems, would not carry the stigma of being another "government entity," and could bring in more private dollars to the funding of child care.

If a public/private partnership is established as the new entity responsible for all early education programs, the

Legislature should take steps to ensure that the partnership is established in such a way that is permissible under federal law. Chapter 45 CFR, sections 98.10 and 98.11 require that the "lead agency" receiving the federal grant funds for subsidized child care be designated by the "chief executive officer of the State." Section 98.2 defines the "lead agency" to mean "the State, territorial, or tribal entity designated" under section 98.10. Sections 98.10 and 98.11 provides that "lead agency" may administer the program "directly or through other governmental or non-governmental agencies," but the "lead agency shall retain overall responsibility for the administration of the program." According to the federal policy director for subsidized child care, the laws described above preclude a state from establishing a public/private partnership as the "lead agency" for receipt of the subsidized child care funds. A public/private partnership could be involved in administering the program, but it would need to have oversight from the Governor.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on issues and concerns identified by stakeholders at both the state and local level, we recommend that the Legislature make changes to the current early education and child care system that will

- ensure that an entity is vested with sufficient authority to oversee the system and ensure that the state will meet its school readiness goals;
- facilitate the development of uniform program outcomes and standards across all early education and child care programs; and
- maintain local discretion, but improve coordination among programs at the local level by providing clear guidance and tools that would build upon the successes of the current system.

Although the Legislature can accomplish these changes in a number of ways, we believe that consolidating the governance of early education and child care programs at the state-level represents the best option. At a minimum, the programs that should be included in this new consolidated governance structure are Prekindergarten Early Intervention, Florida First Start, Even Start Family Literacy Program, and Subsidized Child Care. The specific alternative used to consolidate these programs will depend upon the importance attached to the various advantages and disadvantages of the different alternatives. For example, if minimizing cost is the primary consideration, then the Legislature should consider

consolidating the programs into an existing agency.

Regardless of the specific alternative chosen, we believe that the new governance structure for early education programs should be based upon a foundation for improving program accountability, quality and effectiveness, and reducing the current duplication that exists among the different delivery systems. In addition, the new governance structure should take into account the differences that exist among early education and child care systems at the local level and build upon successes that these systems have been able to accomplish thus far. Therefore, we believe that the Legislature should not prescribe changes at the local level until the issues and concerns (i.e., program outcomes established) are addressed at the state level.

If the Legislature consolidates the governance of early education and child care programs, it will not eliminate the need for collaboration and coordination among school readiness programs. Education and intellectual development is an important part of getting children ready to start school, but it is not the only important part. Health, emotional, and economic services for families and children are also important components of school readiness, and there will be a continued need to develop collaborative relationships with agencies providing these other types of programs.

Agency Responses

Responses from the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education have been reproduced and are printed below.



Buddy MacKay
Governor

Edward A. Feaver
Secretary

December 29, 1998

Mr. John W. Turcotte, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and
Government accountability
111 West Madison Street
Room 312, Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee, FL 32301

Dear Mr. Turcotte:

In response to your December 17 letter, we have reviewed the preliminary findings and recommendations of OPPAGA's review of Early Education and Child Care Programs in Florida. We believe the findings accurately reflect the status of these programs, but we have the following comments:

Page 2

The report correctly indicates that subsidized child care was designed as an economic program to promote financial self-sufficiency. However, as part of the department's performance based budget, the Legislature mandated school readiness outcomes, which we believe should be a major focus of the subsidized child care program. This outcome is not mentioned in the findings.

Page 3, Exhibit 1 - Funding FY 1997/98

For Subsidized Child Care funding FY 1997/98, the figure \$353.6 million represents budget authority. The actual available budget (both federal and state) was \$320,586,256. The difference is unfunded budget authority.⁶

⁶ OPPAGA Note: This change has already been made in the report body.

Response from the Florida Department of Children and Families (continued)

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The findings accurately note the Pre-K program provides services throughout the school year after the initial eligibility is determined, while a child enrolled in subsidized care can be removed each time the parent's income or employment status changes. Please note the subsidized child care policy is set by state and federal statutes and regulations.

Another important factor that affects continuity of care is the parental choice requirement in subsidized child care. Parents often request placement changes, which disrupts the ongoing nurturing relationship that is so important. This issue is not a problem in the Pre-K program.

The finding that "school districts that have not developed a unified system of entry reported that additional guidance from state level administrators would help facilitate the process" seems to imply the only reason some school districts have not implemented a uniform system of entry is the need for additional guidance. We are not sure this is the case, as guidance has been provided through a variety of efforts. Is it possible local autonomy of school systems might also be a factor?

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The report indicates that "a public/private partnership would have the freedom to be creative." This statement implies that a government agency cannot be creative. We disagree as we have established a number of innovative initiatives to improve the quality of child care, including our Gold Seal Programs, Child Care Executive Partnership, Caring for Kids Initiative, and implementation of the T.E.A.C. H. program. Our point here is that a government structure does not necessarily limit creativity.

It is also important to note that whether a government agency or private/public partnership is responsible for the program, federal and state statutory mandates must still be adhered to. We believe the state-level governance alternatives as identified lay out the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative very well.

Regarding child care licensing remaining part of a possible new structure, we believe it should. Child care licensing has been a significant component of the child care program since its inception. Conflict of interest has not been an issue in the past as the child care licensing counselors are separate from the subsidized child care program.

Combining child care and Pre-K would not alter the current relationships as Pre-K programs operated by the schools do not by statute meet the definition of child care, and therefore are not subject to licensure.

The issue regarding the federal 'lead agency' is extremely important. Your guidance to the Legislature is on target and similar to our understanding of federal law. We would provide similar guidance.

Overall, we believe the review of Early Education and Child Care programs completed by OPPAGA is well done, accurately reflects the major issues that need to be addressed, and will provide the Legislature with valuable information to make important decisions.

Our staff report that OPPAGA staff conducting this review, specifically Tim Elwell, Chuck Hefren, and Jane Fletcher, were very professional. They gave us every opportunity to provide information and data needed to prepare this report, and we appreciate their support and good work.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the report. If you have any questions about our response, please call Larry Pintacuda, chief of Child Care, at 488-4900.

Sincerely

/s/ Melissa C. Jacoby for
Edward A. Feaver
Secretary



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400

Tom Gallagher
Commissioner

January 5, 1999

Mr. John W. Turcotte, Director
OPPAGA
111 West Madison Street, Room 312
Tallahassee, Florida 32302

Dear Mr. Turcotte:

As requested, I am pleased to provide this written response to your preliminary findings and recommendations in your review of Early Education and Child Care Programs.

Early education and school readiness will be primary initiatives during my administration. While there are pockets of excellence, our current delivery systems in pre-kindergarten programs are duplicative and therefore, not cost-effective. The system lacks both a consistent method of accountability and a clear definition of program quality. As recent brain research confirms, brain development in the early years of a child's life impacts the child's potential for life.

All of these factors combined lead me to conclude that we must do something differently and I support legislative efforts currently underway to address these challenges. Consolidating the governance of early education and child care programs at the state level while maintaining local flexibility is a positive recommendation in your report with which I concur. Consolidation represents an initial step in improving the overall quality of early education in Florida.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide this response and will permit your inclusion of this response in your report.

Sincerely,
/s/ Tom Gallagher
Tom Gallagher

TG/dmh

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