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## Building a Brighter Future for Florida Pre-K: Recommendations for a more effective universal preschool program in the Sunshine State

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### Abstract:

This paper is intended to be a case study exploring the current Florida early childhood reality and offers recommendations that Florida might implement to improve the quality of their early childhood care. These proposals are rooted in early childhood education research—what we know makes an effective program—and derived from exemplar states that are incorporating this research into their early childhood policies. The intent of the recommendations below is to make strides toward equity in educational outcomes by providing a holistic view of what high- quality education looks like in classrooms and what it costs the state. This paper argues for a balanced understanding of where Florida currently stands relative to its peer states and relative to voters' expectations for VPK and how then Florida may begin moving toward a better solution.

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Building a Brighter Future for Florida Pre-K:  
Recommendations for a more effective universal preschool program in the  
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## Introduction

In response to both cognitive science research that expounds the benefits of high-quality early childhood education for the developing brain, and economic analyses that tout the impressive returns on investment for money spent on high-quality early childhood education, states across the nation are beginning to implement state-provided early education programs (NIEER, 2017). Legislatures have taken different approaches to the design of these programs. Some states, like New Jersey, opted for targeted care, funneling money to the highest-need families (Barnett et al.). Others, like Georgia and Oklahoma, implemented universal care in one fell swoop, tailoring existing public school funding formulas to include the state's four-year-olds or creating new funding streams altogether (NIEER, 2017). Still other states with relatively high levels of access and quality, like West Virginia and Wisconsin, achieved such levels of care through steady increases in funding and enrollment from year-to-year (*Ibid.*).

Mechanisms for providing care vary as well. Some states housed their programs wholly within public school districts, others subsidized private licensed centers, and some a combination of both (*Ibid.*). Like the different program structures, each state took a different approach to passing and funding their respective programs including: legislation, the advent of a independent Early Childhood Education department, or a statewide grant incentive (Parker et al., 2018). However, Florida's approach to its state-provided childcare policy is especially unique as it is the only state to pass early childhood education through direct initiative to the state constitution (NIEER, 2017).

In 2002, Florida voters sidestepped their legislature and enacted universal early childhood education for the state's four-year-olds. Joining Oklahoma and Georgia, Florida became the third and largest state to implement universal care (Bassok et al., 2014). Section b of the resulting

Amendment IX states, “Every four-year-old child in Florida shall be offered a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity.” With Amendment IX in the state constitution, the Florida legislature scrambled to implement a plan.

Despite the fact that Florida now has inscribed in the constitution the right of all four-year-olds to have preschool the program is not living up to its promise. Stagnated per-pupil funding, an inadequate assessment system, and a lack of quality standards put Florida VPK far behind where it ought to be (Lawrence, 2016). The VPK program failed to implement high-quality standards that a state-appointed panel had recommended and due to the need to spread funding over so many students, apportioned per-pupil spending started below national averages and has remained the same since 2002 (Hampton, 2004; NIEER, 2017).

Indeed, Florida consistently performs poorly on national rankings of state-provided early childhood programs. The National Institute for Early Education Research’s 2015 report found that Florida VPK met only three of ten quality benchmarks (NIEER, 2016). After almost fifteen years of implementation, Florida is the state with the highest access to state-funded pre-kindergarten, serving 77% of Florida 4-years-olds, but the 42nd ranked state (out of the 44 states with a state-funded program) in terms of resource allocation (NIEER, 2017).

This underinvestment has consequences. A 2018 Florida Department of Education report shows that only fifty-four percent of Florida students entering kindergarten were prepared, as measured by a kindergarten readiness exam (Stofan, 2018). Only forty-six percent of providers are meeting proficiency requirements, putting them at risk of losing state funding altogether (Postal, 2016). Put simply, the program is far from meeting the goals of providing high quality universal childcare. At present, thirteen years after the rollout of VPK, the state spends nearly \$400 million dollars a year on a program that has not proven to provide the positive impacts on

later learning and school preparedness that early childhood education, when done well, can provide (Miller & Bassok, 2017).

This paper is intended to be a case study exploring the current Florida early childhood reality and offers recommendations that Florida might implement to improve the quality of their early childhood care. These proposals are rooted in early childhood education research—what we know makes an effective program—and derived from exemplar states that are incorporating this research into their early childhood policies. The intent of the recommendations below is to make strides toward equity in educational outcomes by providing a holistic view of what high-quality education looks like in classrooms and what it costs the state. This paper argues for a balanced understanding of where Florida currently stands relative to its peer states and relative to voters' expectations for VPK and how then Florida may begin moving toward a better solution.

Other studies have questioned and criticized the efficacy of Florida's VPK program. But none have taken a case study approach to providing a solution. Georgia is used here as a state for comparison due to its thoughtful implementation of sound, research-based policy, its demographic and socio-economic similarity to Florida, and its proven success in providing high-quality care to four-year-olds. This paper provides proposals for change that could be enacted as soon as the next legislative cycle.

## **Literature Review**

The research on the benefits of early childhood education is vast. Researchers from many different disciplines –neurobiology, psychology, sociology, economics – have conducted studies on the benefits of high-quality early childhood care. We know from the syntheses of these studies that high-quality early childhood education has big payoffs both for the child and for

society writ large (Heckman et al. 2010; Shonkoff et al., 2000; Rothstein, 2004). But in order to receive these payoffs, care must be high-quality and adhere to stringent standards (Calman and Tarr-Whelan, 2005). In the case of Florida VPK, well-intentioned policy goals do not align with what research tells us ought to be the most important aspects of early childhood policy, causing a serious gap between Florida VPK's theoretical soundness and its operational practice.

Therefore, it's necessary to ground this paper in what social science tell us are the best practices in early childhood education before beginning to address possible areas of reform.

### *Why Early Childhood Education Matters*

The evidence base for the positive benefits of high-quality early child education (ECE) is extensive. In the short term, research has found that children who have attended a high-quality early childhood education program exhibit higher language, literacy, and mathematics skills than their peers who did not (Wong, 2008). Socio-emotional benefits are less researched but still point to the ability of a well-executed program to minimize aggression and timidity and to boost attentiveness (Puma, 2005; Gormley, 2009; Heckman, 2012). The smaller evidence base for socio-emotional effects could be explained by a lack of assessment mechanisms for those traits.

Studies have shown that high-quality ECE can have significant benefits into adulthood. Oft-cited studies of two high-quality programs, the Perry Preschool Program and the Abecedarian Program studies, found that participants showed lifelong improvements on employment rates, earning, and reduced the likelihood of reliance on welfare programs and the likelihood of criminal activity or arrest (Heckman et al. 2010). In fact, researchers agree the expansion of high-quality ECE is an important component to closing the achievement gap (Larsen 1989; Shonkoff et al., 2000; Rothstein, 2004). Duncan and Magnuson (2011) found that

average effect sizes amounted to almost half of race differences in the kindergarten achievement gap.

Because of the research supporting significant improvements for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, some have argued that a targeted approach to early childhood care is the best utilization of resources rather than the universal approach used by Florida. Advocates for a targeted approach say that these programs are more efficient and cost the public less, therefore making them more likely to be supported by the public and that, because of their relatively small number of children, they can better focus on the quality of care (Barnett et al., 2004). Proponents of a universal program argue the opposite, saying that targeted programs fail to reach eligible populations thereby counteracting any savings, and that because of American attitudes toward entitlement programs, universal programs enjoy more widespread support due to the larger, more influential population benefiting from the program (*Ibid.*).

The evidence suggests that there are some drawbacks to targeted programs. First, problems of school readiness and educational failure are not strictly problems of children in poverty and that all children can benefit from high-quality preschool (Magnuson et al., 2003; Gormley et al., 2005; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013).[1] Second, targeted programs often fail to reach their target population. Identifying and enrolling eligible children has proven to be a costly and ever-changing endeavor (Greenberg et al., 2003; Barnett et al., 2004). Last, targeted programs suffer from the political reality that more popular support exists for programs with broader constituencies (Skocpol, 1991; Gelbach & Pritchett, 2002). When targeted programs are in place it's hard for them to secure the budget necessary for high-quality care (Gelbach & Pritchett, 2002; Barnett et al., 2004). Moreover, universal programs are more politically popular (Raden, 1999; Barnett et al., 2004).

### *A Need to Focus on Quality*

Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that in order to benefit from early education programs, children—especially disadvantaged children—must have attended high-quality programs. What does this quality look like? Certain factors must be present in order for a program to be high-quality. They include the foundational *structural factors* of quality like a safe physical setting, high adult-child ratio, developmentally-appropriate curriculum, and small groups for play and interaction. These factors must be in place to facilitate *process factors* of quality. These process factors are those that influence a child’s immediate experience, such as a language-rich environment and warm and responsive adult-child interactions. Process factors—notably the interaction between teacher and student—are the most important contributors to children’s gains in language, literacy, mathematics, and social skills (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). The mere presence of structural factors does not ensure that the all-important process factors are successfully present, however, process quality cannot be achieved without first having a strong foundation in structural quality (Early et al., 2007; Burchinal et al., 2008; Burchinal et al., 2010; Zaslow et al., 2010).

There is also evidence to suggest that programs are most effective when they begin with clearly defined goals and a curriculum or intervention plan closely aligned to those goals (Clements, 2007; Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Consortium, 2008; Yoshikawa, 2013; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Curricula should be age-appropriate and focus on skills and capabilities as well as areas of achievement. There is evidence to suggest that early childhood education suffered the effects of a national trend toward “drill and kill” learning after the accountability obsession at the beginning of the century (Stipek,

2006; Duncan, 2011). But developmental science shows that this type of school readiness is not only less important than a child's feelings of safety and wellbeing and the development of their cognitive and social skills but that a focus on math and literacy can actually be harmful to a child's development (Shonkoff et al., 2000; Stipek, 2006, Bassok et al., 2016). Researchers agree that there should be more resources devoted to a child's emotional, regulatory, and social development (Shonkoff et al., 2000; Stipek, 2006).

Due to the ability for center-based caregivers to better develop and deliver these factors, center-based programs are associated with better cognitive and achievement outcomes (NICHD Early Childcare Research Network; Duncan, 2003; Duncan and Magnuson, 2013). However, studies in all types of care settings—private child care centers, Head Start programs, public school settings—have shown lasting positive effects in a myriad of research methods (Pianta et al., 2009).

### *The Early Childhood Landscape Today*

Because of the positive literature on the benefits of the early care for children and their families, there has been a proliferation of new early childhood programs, primarily through state-run initiatives (Jenkins, 2014, Stevens & England 2016). Yet there exists a research-policy gap. We know that relationships are critically important for the developing child (Shonkoff, 2000; Yoshikawa 2013). This has resulted in policy that stresses low teacher-to-child ratios, but the training and selection of a highly-skilled early childhood workforce has remained relatively unemphasized in policy planning (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).

Research shows that proper attention and care to the developing brain has benefits for the child, the family, the community, and society as a whole. Such overwhelming evidence for the positive benefits of a high-quality environment in the early years has led to a sense of urgency in states across the nation for the development of state programs. Florida felt this urgency at the turn of the century but hasn't taken heed of what research tells us makes a program high quality. In an overview of the program Bassok and his team (2014) concluded

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

(Bassok et al., 2014)

By contrast, Georgia used research to guide policy from the outset. These different approaches have led to two drastically different preschool systems, the latter more thoughtful and effective than the former.

### **Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten in Florida**

After a yearlong campaign led by early childhood advocates to get the program on the ballot, and eventually written into the state constitution, the Florida legislature had little time to consider best practices, or more accurately, to figure out a way to fund best practices (Hampton, 2004). This compressed timeline meant the state commission's recommendations for a six hour school day, a 10:1 student-to-teacher ratio, a pre- and post-assessment to measure quality,

accredited teachers, and a statewide standards requirement were all but ignored (Bassok et al, 2014). Instead, Florida created a program that fell short on nearly every facet of structural quality. Currently, the state funds only 3 hours of care a day for 180 days, or full day care only in the summer months. Student-to-teacher ratios are 11:1. Teachers must pass a criminal background check and have at least a Children’s Development Associate Degree (CDA) but have no further educational requirements.

In 2017, the Florida Office of Early Learning released a new and improved set of State Standards for Early Learning. State statute requires that the Early Learning Standards be re-evaluated every five years. These 2017 standards were developed by a team of experts brought in from across the nation and are founded in what we know about the developing brain. They break down learning into eight “Domains”

- I. Physical Development
- II. Approaches to Learning
- III. Social and Emotional Development
- IV. Language and Literacy
- V. Mathematical Thinking
- VI. Scientific Inquiry
- VII. Social Studies
- VIII. Creative Expression Through the Arts

(Florida Office of Early Learning, 2017)

In addition to these Domains, the 2017 State Standards set forth learning objectives for each, providing examples of what they might look like in a classroom and providing a way for teachers to evaluate whether a given developmental milestone has been mastered. But, although the Office of Early Learning developed and released these robust and high-quality State Standards for what kids ought to be learning in VPK classrooms, they don’t align with either VPK curriculum nor VPK assessment, which focuses instead on literary, mathematical, and phonological skills rather than holistic development. Curriculum is not mandated by the state and

providers are free to use any curricula they'd like (including self-developed) with virtually no oversight from the state (Interview with Wendy Miller, an official in the Office of Early Learning, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019). In terms of oversight, there's very little (Bassok et al., 2014). The state has developed a decentralized oversight structure with regional Early Learning Coalitions (ELCs) to oversee local centers. There are 31 independent ELCs throughout the state, each with their unique processes of accountability (Florida Office of Early Learning). The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS)—a test administered once to children in their first thirty days of kindergarten in public school—is the only metric used to hold providers accountable. The results from these tests are used to determine whether a provider is in good standing (if at least 60% of their students perform well enough to be considered “kindergarten ready”) or whether they are on probation and must work with their ELC to come up with an improvement plan. There exists no mandated quality rating system (known as QRIS across the country). Participation in quality rating is left up to each ELC (Florida Office of Early Learning). Some, like the Miami-Dade Early Learning Coalition, adopted a QRIS system. Miami-Dade ELC's QRIS allowed for “more robust professional development, real-time feedback, coaching and mentoring, and other essential data for a wide range of purposes.” (QRIS State Profile). Other ELCs have no quality rating system (*Ibid.*).

All in all, Florida's system fails to meet the standards for high quality care suggested by the research. However, it does lead the nation in terms of access, which means improvement in quality is possible (NIEER, 2017). To improve, Florida must learn both from the research and from states like Georgia, which has integrated best practices whenever possible.

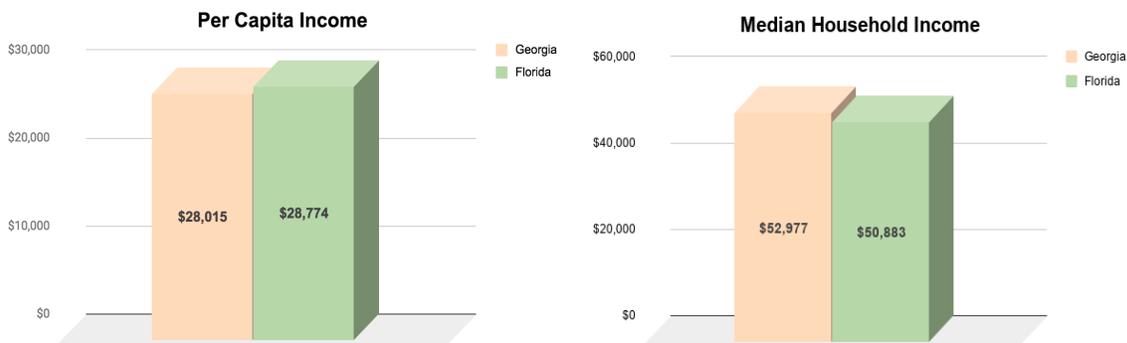
## Case Study: Georgia’s “Bright from the Start” universal preschool program

### Comparing Georgia and Florida

As one of a handful of states with universal preschool, Georgia offers an appropriate case study for lessons that may be applicable to improving quality of care Florida. Georgia, unlike Florida, spent years developing its universal program: creating an entirely new funding source and rolling out pilot programs before launching statewide. Its policies were explicitly informed by social science research and the studies that have been conducted on Georgia’s program in the last decade show encouraging results for the efficacy of a program founded in best practices.

The states do share similarities, though, another reason why Georgia is so fitting a comparison model. Both states are in the Southeastern United States and have large expanses of rural areas but also large metropolitan cities. Although Florida’s population is more than double that of Georgia’s, they have similar demographic breakdowns and similar levels of both median and per capita income, as shown below.

	Florida	Georgia
Population	21,229,325	10,519,475
White alone, not Hispanic	54.1%	52.8%
Black or African American alone	16.9%	32.2%
American Indian and Alaskan Native alone	0.5%	0.5%
Asian alone	2.9%	4.2%
Hispanic or Latino	9.6%	25.6%
Two or more races	2.1%	2.1%



Source: US Census

### *Brief History of Georgia's "Bright from the Start Pre-K" Program*

Georgia implemented the country's first state-wide universal preschool program in the early 1990s. Governor Miller, the governor of the state at the time, proposed the creation of a state lottery to benefit education, with lottery revenues funding a statewide preschool initiative. The proposal was passed by voters, and in 1992 a small pilot program rolled out, serving 750 at-risk students four-year-olds at twenty sites across the state (Peisner-Feinberg, 2014). Now, decades later, Georgia's "Bright From the Start" program serves 80,874 students at 1,857 sites (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2017) and is regarded as one of the country's shining examples of how a statewide program can provide high-quality, universal early childhood education (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2016; NIEER, 2017). This success follows years of extensive planning on behalf of Georgia's legislature. Georgia's lawmakers, researchers, and citizens have worked intentionally and thoughtfully in the 25 years since the program's inception to align policy with what research tells us about best practices in early care. Creative systems of accountability and assessment as well as a steadfast dedication to structural quality have provided high-quality early childhood education.

### *Georgia's Success*

Georgia has found success in its universal program by following closely the recommendations and findings from early childhood researchers in the last twenty years. This means both structural and process quality, with an emphasis on student-teacher relationships, teacher wellbeing and satisfaction, and constant re-evaluation and improvement.

Georgia has committed itself to a strong foundation in structural quality. It's program offers 6.5 hours of care a day for 180 days of the year, minimum salary requirements for teachers

that are on par with K-12 teacher salaries, a yearly training requirement for all early childhood teachers, curriculum that is aligned to quality standards, and an assessment system that measures all components of a developing child (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2019).

Furthermore, unlike Florida, Georgia has aligned its standards with its assessment system and its provider accountability system. “Bright from the Start” has a robust definition of what it means for a child to be “ready” for school. Georgia’s goals for school readiness include a child’s literacy and numeracy but also:

- suspected physical or mental disabilities have been addressed,
- enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence toward learning is demonstrated,
- feelings of both self and others are recognized,
- social and interpersonal skills are emerging,
- communication with others is effective,
- early literacy skills are evident, and
- a general knowledge about the world, things, places, events, and people has been acquired.

(Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2017)

These goals can also be found in the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) which lay forth a vision for Georgia’s four-year-old’s that includes five parts of the developing child:

1. Physical Development and Motor Skills
2. Social and Emotional Development

3. Approaches to Play and Learning
4. Communication, Language and Literacy
5. Cognitive Development and General Knowledge

(Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2017)

To ensure that these standards are being implemented in classrooms, Georgia has an approved list of curricula that providers can choose from. These curricula have been vetted by the state's department of education to ensure they faithfully teach students the skills necessary to achieve the skills and competencies listed above (DECAL).

In order to measure that these competencies are being taught effectively in classrooms, Georgia's Bright from the Start program utilizes an assessment system known as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The system is a research-based observation tool that aims to measure both the structural factors (curriculum, standards, materials, training and education) and process factors of quality (implementation, relationships, social and academic interactions). In this assessment, a trained Observer observes the class for four separate 20-minute windows and ranks the classroom on each measure of quality. This allows both the state and the provider to feel secure that the desired outcomes, standards, and assessment methods are all aligned. Additionally, the CLASS metric is used in all Georgia classrooms, creating a manageable oversight method for the state (DECAL; Teachstone).

In addition to the CLASS accountability system, providers can opt-in to the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), known in Georgia as Quality Rated. QRIS are used in states across the country as a way to rank providers so that families can make informed decisions about which center their child ought to attend (Teachstone, 2017). While the Quality

Rated system is not mandated in Georgia, it is highly encouraged with incentives for providers who participate (GA Quality Rated). Once a provider opts into the system and creates a provider account, they create a provider portfolio which includes important information about the center. Then, a Quality Rated observation is completed and the provider receives a ranking. At that time, the provider can choose its “Bonus Package.” Packages can be anything from furniture to materials to professional development for the center’s teachers. All bonus packages also contribute to the improved quality of the center. Providers also receive bonus packages for maintaining a high Quality Rated ranking (*Ibid.*).

Not all of the above has happened quickly. Georgia has constantly re-evaluated its Bright from the Start program and developed with new priorities for the legislature to tackle. In years past that’s meant an increase in the standards for assistant teacher education level, a concerted effort for parity with state K-16 systems, and, most recently, the expansion of the bilingual program (DECAL).

Additionally, Georgia has committed itself to researching the efficacy of different policy proposals and programs. In 2011, Georgia General Assembly commissioned a multi-year evaluation of program effectiveness, utilizing multiple study designs, each targeted to evaluate a different component of the program. The results of this studies are discussed below.

**Study 1** was designed to test Pre-K outcomes and overall learning and collected data from a randomized sample of 100 classrooms and 509 students. Researchers found evidence that Georgia’s Bright from the Start program contributed to increased learning and strong classroom organization and emotional support. The study concluded that students “Children exhibited significant growth during their pre-k year across all domains of learning, including language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and behavioral skills,” and that “In the area of

teacher-child interactions, classroom practices were stronger in emotional support and classroom organization than instructional support, as measured by the CLASS.” (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2012)

**Study 1a** aimed to understand the process and efficacy of Georgia’s recruitment and enrollment of eligible populations (which in the case of universal, free programs is every four-year-old in the state). Researchers found that though there were some barriers to enrollment (a high number of forms, inconsistent foreign language availability) most programs used a first-come-first-served method for enrollment. The report proposed some changes to the waitlist procedures, which were then adopted the next year (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2013)

**Study 2** sought to compare children who had attended a Bright from the Start Program to children who had not using a Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD). After collecting data on “individual assessments of language, literacy, math, and general knowledge skills [as well as] teacher ratings of behavior skills” results from the study showed “participation in Georgia’s Pre-K Program significantly improved children’s school readiness skills across a wide range of language, literacy, math, and general knowledge measures.” (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2014).

Finally, **Study 3** was a longitudinal study aiming to document both the short- and long-term effects of participation in a Bright from the Start Pre-K program. In this study, 1,181 students randomly selected from 199 Bright from the Start centers were tracked through the first grade. Results found that “children’s growth on most [learning] measures, which were norm-referenced, indicated that they progressed at a greater rate than would be expected for normal developmental growth” even through the first grade (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2016).

Additionally, the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) has conducted pilot studies specifically focused on how best to expand the state’s teacher professional development

and summer transition programs, showcasing the political will of the state to constantly improve their program. These studies show that Georgia is committed to research-based policy for its universal Pre-K program.

### Summary Chart: Florida vs. Georgia

	Florida	Georgia
Year of inception	2005	1995
Percent of state population enrolled (2018)	77%	61%
Money spent per pupil	\$2,177	\$4,441
Hours per day	3 hours (6 during Summer)	6.5 hours
Days per year	School Year (or Summer)	School Year
Teacher credentials	All teachers: CDA and criminal background	Lead Teacher: BA in ECE-related field; assistant teachers: CDA or equivalent
Teacher to student ratio	1:11	1:11
State Standards?	Yes, founded in research	Yes, founded in research
Curriculum?	Provider determines, no oversight, no alignment to standards	Provider chooses from a list of pre-approved curricula that are aligned to state standards
Assessment?	Kindergarten Readiness Screener administered in first thirty days of public, data used to put providers on probation/can eventually be used to revoke state funding	Structured classroom observations through CLASS, data used to support improvement
Quality Rating System?	None; local control	Statewide, opt-in, incentive-based

## Recommendations

In comparison to the best research available and Georgia's comparative success in meeting such standards, it is clear that Florida VPK is not meeting its voter mandate of "high quality care for all." While we know that the highest quality care is expensive and would take a major shift in legislative will and millions of state dollars, there exist actionable policy mechanisms in the recommendations below that would improve outcomes for Florida's children. Following Georgia's lead, these recommendations focus on building strongly-aligned structural components of quality because without the presence of high-quality structural components, process quality is nearly impossible to achieve (Early et al., 2007; Burchinal et al., 2008; Burchinal et al., 2010; Zaslow et al., 2010).

### **1. Abolish the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) and replace with a system of observation akin to Georgia's CLASS.**

Currently, Florida's assessment system (FLKRS) doesn't adequately measure the state's proposed standards. This goes explicitly against state statute that requires an "instrument that assesses the readiness of each student for kindergarten based on the performance standards adopted by the department" (Section 1002.69, Florida Statutes). While the current assessment meets some of the performance standards set forth in the state's most recent Early Learning and Developmental Standards, the test's extreme focus on literacy and math standards leaves out the all-important social-emotional development of young children as well as other key components of the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards. Florida's Office of Early Learning is clear about the importance of appropriate assessment,

[Assessments] measure progress. Assessments are like a doctor's regular checkups to be sure a child is growing and developing as expected. These checkups or assessments allow teachers to see how their efforts are working and parents to see how their children are progressing. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) is a statewide assessment that measures how well prepared 5-year-olds are for kindergarten based on readiness for learning in areas including early literacy, language and early numeracy skills.

(Florida Office of Early Learning, 2018)

Yet the fifteen minute test, purporting to measure “early literacy, language, and early numeracy skills” tests only two of eight domains from the 2017 Florida Early Learning and Development Standards (Florida Office of Early Learning, 2017). Moreover, the assessment's administration—given once to all Florida kindergarteners within their first 30 days—doesn't allow for a measure of progress but rather a one-time score.

The Office of Early Learning then uses students' FLKRS scores to calculate a VPK provider's “readiness rate.” This rate is then published online and is available to families and caregivers. The readiness rate also dictates whether or not a VPK provider receives state funding. In 2018, providers had to achieve at least a 60 percent readiness rate or face probation, which would mean having to develop and implement an improvement plan. After repeated years of failure to meet the minimum readiness rate, the provider loses state funding, increasing its burden of providing high-quality care.

The statute requiring a yearly assessment administered to kindergarteners was passed in 2005, in the era of standardized testing and No Child Left Behind. The punitive nature of its utilization leaves providers frustrated, as providers who work with higher-needs populations are disproportionately put on probation for failure to meet an arbitrary readiness rate without a chance to demonstrate a student's growth in their program by way of a pre- and post-test. Providers are

so agitated with the current assessment that they are leaving VPK altogether, citing an inability of the state to meet the needs of their student populations (Postal, 2018).

Additionally, constantly changing assessment types and contracts with different testing companies have made it impossible for the state to get a clear understanding of how prepared students are (Postal, 2018). Since VPK began in 2002, the state has gone through five different test formats with three different testing companies (*Ibid.*). The FLKRS has, since VPK's inception, been the main way for the state to provide families with a measure of a provider's quality and yet, in the past four years readiness rates have not been published due to concern over the validity of the tests (Memorandum from the Florida Department of Education, February 24, 2017; Postal, 2018).

Even if the tests were valid, there's no agreement that standardized assessment for young students is indicative of actual learning and, more concerning, there is some evidence to suggest that such a staunch emphasis on pre-academic readiness is negatively affecting later attitudes toward schooling by teaching students to rely on instruction-heavy, pedantic learning rather than intrinsic motivation (Christakis, 2016).

While evaluating VPK providers is not inherently flawed, the FLKRS is not effectively measuring provider outcomes (Postal, 2018). The best way to quantify whether Florida children are learning all of what the Office of Early Learning set forth in their standards is to observe classroom environments, as research on the importance of in-classroom relationships between students and teachers suggests and Georgia exemplifies. This is being done in Georgia through the CLASS. A similar system could be employed in Florida if recommendations below are followed and a more cohesive oversight system than what currently exists is put into place.

## **2. Incentivize providers to participate in a centralized Quality Rating system**

Currently, there is no statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in Florida. This is despite findings that show program quality increases over time with participation in QRIS (Yazejian and Iruka, 2014). Georgia similarly does not mandate that providers partake in the state's QRIS system but, as previously mentioned, it does incentivize providers for their participation (GA Quality Rated).

A statewide QRIS would be nearly impossible to implement now given Florida's current decentralized structure of oversight. In the state's contract with potential new providers there is a stipulation that states providers must work alongside their Early Learning Coalition (ELC) to oversee quality (Statewide VPK Provider Contract, 2014). However, there are thirty-one different ELCs governing providers, each with a unique system of oversight. While the state reserves the right to randomly visit providers, this is not done in any sort of organized fashion (Interview with Wendy Miller, an official in the Office of Early Learning, March 16th, 2019). Dissolving the different regional ELCs and housing the responsibility of oversight in the state Office of Early Learning would give Florida the ability to develop a standard QRIS and incentivize providers to participate. A centralized Quality Rating and Improvement System would better help families make the right decision about the child's care but would also help both the state and providers (Teachstone, 2017). Instead of having thirty-one unique approaches to accountability, a QRIS would provide the state a clearer understanding of which providers are improving educational outcomes so that it can continue to provide them with resources and so that it can identify the providers who need additional resources, which is where a local coalition could lend a helping hand.

For providers, a system that rewards high-quality instead of punishing subpar quality could help them better serve communities. In Georgia, providers can receive bonus packages of

furniture or materials for the classroom or free professional development for their teachers for agreeing to participate in the state's QRIS. If a similar program were introduced in Florida, the state would have a better grasp on what's happening in centers and providers could continue to improve quality of care.

### **3. Focus on the recruitment and training of a qualified Early Childhood workforce as well as support and retainment of existing teachers**

Nationwide, the early childhood profession suffers from unlivable wages that do not reflect the widely recognized importance of early childhood education (Whitebook et al., 2016; Institute of Medicine, 2015). The typical center-based teacher earns about \$30,000 in annual income (Wat, 2017). Florida is no exception. A study from the University of Florida finds that Florida must make changes to ensure their classrooms are taught and staffed by highly qualified teachers who are earning enough to live above the level of poverty by investing in the state's human capital.

We know that a early childhood teacher is more likely to stay in the workforce if they feel respected and if they teach in a high-quality environment (Jennings, 2014). Additionally, the most effective early childhood teachers are those that understand the developing brain (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015). Research on the efficacy of higher degrees is robust enough to conclude that at least lead teachers in the classroom should hold a Bachelor's Degree and have some Early Childhood Education-specific training (*Ibid.*; Phillips et al., 2017). Currently, Florida's teacher accreditation policy does not require anything more than a Children's Development Associate Degree (CDA) and only 4% of early childhood educators in the state report having a college degree. The lax state statute lags behind the science of child

development and early learning, which indicates that the work of lead educators for young children is based on a high level of sophisticated knowledge and competencies (University of Florida Lastinger Center, 2011; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015). Lead teachers in Georgia are required to have a Bachelors in an ECE-related field and get paid a higher salary the more advanced degrees they have earned, this is in addition to a baseline salary that is on par with K-12 teachers and also a robust professional development system.

In efforts to move toward a system of higher teacher educational attainment, there should be a commitment to the teachers already in the field. Implementing a stringent degree requirement may force out quality teachers (Wat, 2017). Top-down requirements for continued-education degrees are cumbersome and highly effective teachers who have been in the workforce for many years are equipped with requisite knowledge and experience even if they don't have a four-year degree (*Ibid.*). Some states have developed "credit for prior learning," a way to officially recognize experiential learning and content knowledge of current teachers without a formal degree (Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, 2010). In Florida, aims should be taken to support and retain veteran teachers by improving access to higher education programs for those already in the classroom. For example, building adequate time in an early childhood teacher's work schedule to attend classes and compensating teachers for time spent earning a higher degree (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

Georgia has implemented supplementary income (essentially a raise) for every two years a teacher stays in a early childhood classroom (DECAL, 2019). Since research tells us that early childhood education teachers are more likely to stay in the field if given wages comparable to those of K-12 teachers, Georgia has also passed legislation in recent years to increase salary

levels in an effort to achieve parity between preschool teachers and their K-12 counterparts (Jennings, 2014; DECAL, 2017)

Additionally, that same study from the University of Florida found “no statewide professional development system” currently exists in the state (University of Florida Lastinger Center, 2011). For example, the Office of Early Learning released new and improved standards in 2017 but didn’t require existing teachers to be trained in how to implement them in the classroom (Interview with Wendy). Robust and continued teacher training is necessary to keep educators abreast of newest innovation in early childhood learning but it’s currently lacking in Florida (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

#### **4. Produce and disseminate standard curricula that are aligned with the Florida Early Learning Standards**

Currently, there is no requirement that providers use a curriculum in the classroom that is deemed effective or high-quality by the Office of Early Learning. Rather, a provider’s is only contractually obligated to provide a curricula that:

- A. Are developmentally appropriate;
- B. Are designed to prepare children for early literacy;
- C. Enhance the age-appropriate progress of children in attaining each of the performance standards approved for use in VPK; and
- D. Prepare children to be ready for kindergarten.

(Statewide VPK Provider Contract, 2014)

However, with a less-than-robust system of oversight, ELCs and the state often don’t check to ensure that a provider’s curriculum covers even the aforementioned basics. Moreover, these entities don’t know about a provider’s curricular shortcomings until their students score unsatisfactorily on the FLKRS.

In my interview with Wendy Miller, an official in the Florida Office of Early Learning<sup>1</sup>, she presented the inability of the state to oversee what curriculum is being taught in classrooms, as the most pressing issue facing Florida lawmakers:

“There has [sic] to be accountability pieces in place to ensure that what is happening now is high-quality. I would say [we need] more emphasis on instruction and accountability for instruction. Ensuring that the teaching is actually happening, that the standards are being used with fidelity, and developmentally-appropriate curriculum is being used. In Florida, the providers are able, based on statute, to use any curricula that they wish—it could even be created themselves—as long as it’s aligned with the standards. But there’s no checking on that.”

(Interview with Wendy Miller, March 16th, 2019)

Instead, the state can provide a list of approved curriculum offerings. This allows providers the autonomy of choosing which curriculum best works for their teachers and students but gives the state peace of mind in knowing that the curriculum adheres to the Standards set forth.

## **5. Increase the length of a school day**

The research suggests that full-day care is the optimal amount of time students ought to be in care in order to establish meaningful relationships with caregivers and peers (Shonkoff, 2000; Jennings, 2014). A 2007 study comparing full-day preschool students to half-day preschool students found that parents whose child was in full-day care reported being more satisfied and reported higher more progress from their child and teachers reported that they full-day students were more adjusted with academic life (Herry et al, 2007). As it exists now, VPK cannot support high-quality care because the mandated three-hours-per-day is not adequate time for such instruction and care. While most families pay the additional fee to receive full day care, this cost is inevitably prohibitive to some and therefore defeats the purpose of universal care (McKinnon, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed as the interview was conducted with the assurance of anonymity.

### *Summary*

Before attempting to solve the more nuanced and complicated issues of process quality in Florida classrooms, we must give children a fighting chance to develop the close, trusting relationships with teachers and caregivers that are so crucial to learning in a high-quality setting.

Tackling these five structural recommendations:

1. Replacing a punitive, standardized test with a standardized, in-class observation assessment tool as means for provider accountability
2. Offering incentives for providers to participate in a statewide Quality Rating and Information System
3. Tightening standards of teacher educational attainment while providing pathways for current teachers to improve their practice
4. Producing and disseminating state-approved curricula that are aligned with 2017 Florida Early Learning Standards
5. Increasing the length of the school day to full day

Should be Florida's first step in creating a universal program that is high-quality in both theory and practice.

### **Limitations and Future Study**

Given the limitations of time, I found it necessary to focus on a narrow case study and a limited set of recommendations. However, a more robust study could have considered more than one exemplar state. (Oklahoma and West Virginia, for example, are also models for universal pre-k states, and New Jersey provides compelling evidence for a targeted approach.)

Additionally, while I am extremely grateful for Wendy Miller's participation in this research,

hearing the perspectives of Florida VPK providers would be helpful in understanding where best the state can allocate resources to help students. Finally, I am aware that all the aforementioned recommendations cost significant amounts of money. Further research should include, insofar as possible, a cost breakdown of these legislative recommendations.

## **Conclusion**

My study of early childhood education research has convinced me of the efficacy of high-quality early childhood education. As a resident of Florida, the gap between what Florida voters intended when passing this amendment for universal Pre-K and the quality of care (or lack thereof) currently being offered to the state's four-year-olds is glaring.

Florida has designed a program that is disjointed and decentralized. Its very structure prohibits high-quality. Any large-scale change is difficult and this is no exception but by changing the oversight structure and incentivizing providers to participate in a new quality rating system Florida can begin to move toward the high-quality it's been promising for almost fifteen years. By investing in its human capital, Florida can develop a early childhood workforce that is qualified to be teaching the most impressionable minds. By developing state-sponsored curricula, Florida can finally put to use its phenomenal state standards. With these recommendations, Florida has the opportunity to close the gap between best research and current practice.

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[1] Many earlier studies focused specifically on measuring the outcomes of early education for children from poor families (Reynolds, 1989; Howes, 2008; Leak et al., 2010). These studies analyzed targeted programs and, more recently, the implementation of universal programs in a few cities and state has made it possible to compare student achievement based on certain identifies, like income (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). High-quality preschool has the greatest positive impact on children living in or near poverty, but produces significant positive results for middle-income students as well (Larsen, 1989; Gormley et al. 2005; Gormley et al., 2008; Leak et al. 2010)