

EDITORIAL OPINION

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Florida needs bigger investment in prekindergarten

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In order to keep our competitive edge in today's knowledge-based economy, the next generation must have the skills, knowledge and dispositions to create and sustain new forms of enterprise.

Communities where all children enter kindergarten ready to learn are best positioned to thrive in the 21st century. Research shows 85 percent of brain development occurs before age 3, and growth is particularly affected by the quality of children's home and educational learning environments.

This research has special implications for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are exposed to an estimated 30 million fewer words than their economically advantaged peers (Hart & Risley, 2003). Nobel laureate economist James J. Heckman (2012) estimated that for "every dollar spent on high quality, birth-to-5 programs for disadvantaged children delivers a 13 percent per annum return on investment over the course of a lifetime."

Florida is outspent on early childhood education by most states; our children's preparation reflects that. Accord-

ing to a Florida House of Representatives report, more than 38,000 of Florida's children weren't ready for kindergarten in 2014, the most recent year for which data was available. Serving 80 percent of Florida's 4-year-olds, the voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) half-day program is funded at approximately \$2,400 per student, ranking it third for access and 39th for spending nationally (Barnett, et al., 2015).

Kids Count, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation at the University of South Florida, reports Florida ranked 40th of 50 on overall child well-being, including economic, educational, health and family and community indicators (AECF, 2016).

In our cost study, we asked what it would take to provide "high-quality" early childhood education (ECE) in Southwest Florida, knowing our methods could be replicated in other regions or statewide. We engaged local and national experts to participate in a "professional judgment cost study" aimed to estimate the cost of resources needed to prepare all children for kindergarten.

Our expert panels determined kindergarten readiness is more than just knowing ABCs and 123s. It's about developing the whole child, including what it takes to promote social and emotional growth so that our youth cannot only read, write and compute, but work well with others, have their curiosity engaged and develop creative problem-solving skills — all of which are necessary for success in the 21st-century workforce.

Guest commentaries

A guest commentary can be 675 words or less on a topical subject. Authors must have considerable experience, public involvement or expertise in the subject matter. A guest commentary may be returned to the author with a recommendation to resubmit it as a Letter to the Editor within the guidelines for letters. It is recommended that authors receive clearance before submission; call 239-435-3457.

difficult to estimate how much we spend educating 3- and 4-year-olds in Southwest Florida. With aggregated spending from VPK (state), school readiness (state), Head Start (federal) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (federal), we estimated spending is about \$3,720 per student enrolled in a private center.

Unlike other counties with a dedicated tax to support this population, Southwest Florida counties don't make a significant local contribution. Parents contribute approximately \$6,525 annually for children attending center-based programs. Our study estimated the funding gap between what we spend as a community and what we need to spend is about \$1,812 per child. This funding gap still places a large share of the financial burden on parents, one that is lifted when a child enters kindergarten.

To fully fund ECE and lessen the burden on parents, the state could double VPK funding per child and expand access to the program for all 3-year-olds. Alternatively, the obligation could be met with local funding drawn from property or sales tax revenue.

A state match on local tax effort could provide a joint state and local solution to the ECE funding dilemma. Our next analysis will examine these options in greater detail.

The study is available at FSW.EDU/soe/dean. Miller is the dean of the School of Education at Florida SouthWestern State College. Just is the senior research analyst at Florida SouthWestern State College's School of Education.

To meet this standard, our panelists recommended significantly smaller student-teacher ratios (four fewer students per teacher in classrooms serving 3-year-olds and six fewer in classrooms serving 4-year-olds). Panelists also suggested teacher qualification standards should be raised to ensure "kindergarten readiness" for all children.

In today's ECE classrooms, teachers with bachelor's degrees are more the exception than the rule. Our panelists recommended that all lead teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree and teaching assistants hold at least an associate degree, qualifications that are consistent with Head Start and Florida's VPK recommendations.

Augenblick, Palaich and Associates Inc., our study partner, estimated the cost of resources recommended by our expert panels is \$12,057 per child. It is