



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

POSITION PAPER



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Florida Education Funders' Guiding Statement

Funders will support a culture of high expectations for all students, in and out of school, from early childhood through postsecondary education, leading to career success.

Florida Education Funders Roles

- 1 Provide a learning agenda on Florida-specific issues aligned with group initiatives
- 2 Work on a shared advocacy agenda
- 3 Network, potentially leading to deeper programmatic learning & funding collaborations

FPN Florida Education Funders Initiatives



Advancement of Early Childhood Education

Support ready to learn initiatives (before K) and grade level reading



College and Career Ready High School Graduates

Support strategies during K-12 to prepare graduates for future success



Post-secondary Access, Persistence and Success

Increase equitable accessibility and affordability of post-secondary programs

INTRODUCTION

The **FPN Florida Education Funders** believe that Florida's future economic health is tied directly to an effective educational pipeline from birth through post-secondary achievement, i.e., cradle to career. The resulting skilled workforce is a critical outcome. Funder's support of this takes a two-fold approach; **1)** a Learning Agenda to increase members' knowledge on topics appropriate to its focus areas and **2)** Policy Engagement which is undertaken as opportunities present themselves and as FPN members determine. Policy work may be done collectively (as FPN) or individually by members.

FPN recognizes that effective early childhood education (ECE) is critical to a student's later academic success and their career. Numerous studies as reported on by McCoy, et al.¹ document the positive medium and long-term impacts on educational outcomes, support ECE's utility for reducing education-related expenditures, and promote child well-being.

Florida was an early adopting state for universal voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) for 4-year-olds. The first students were enrolled in 2008 and there has been a steady increase in the percent of eligible students enrolled, from 61% to 72% in 2020 (the latest year figures are available). Despite the widespread availability of VPK, only 57% of students entering kindergarten are considered "kindergarten ready"². The funding has not increased since VPK was introduced when adjusted for inflation. In 2020 dollars it has gone down from \$3,224 for 2008 to \$2,401 in 2020. Additionally, Florida has a School Readiness program to help children from low-income families get the support they need to be successful in school. The School Readiness Program offers financial assistance to low-income families for early child education and care so that families can become financially self-sufficient, and their young children can be successful in school in the future.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University conducts research³ to inform policy supporting high-quality early education. NIEER rates each state on its VPK standards, funding, and participation levels. Through NIEER's years of research they have established 10 quality benchmarks which are most indicative of success for early learning programs. Florida meets just 2 of these benchmarks as noted in the adjacent table. Note that while Florida's standards don't meet all benchmarks, the latest NIEER analysis does not take into consideration HB 419 & HB 7011 passed during the 2022 Florida legislative session which established a timeline for phasing in a new VPK accountability system and progress monitoring system by 2023. Additionally, in some cases local practice currently does meet or exceed the NIEER benchmarks.

Met? NIEER Benchmark

✓	Early learning & development standard
✓	Maximum class size
✗	Curriculum supports
✗	Teacher degree
✗	Teacher specialized training
✗	Assistant teacher degree
✗	Staff professional development
✗	Staff-child ratio
✗	Screening & referral
✗	Continuous quality improvement system

POSITIONS

The Florida Education Funders are committed to promoting increases in the rate of kindergarten readiness in the state. It supports positions on early childhood education which include a commitment to adequate funding for a world class system which meets or exceeds the NIEER benchmarks, a “best in class” evaluation system, supports for highly qualified teachers, and a system that operates equitably. Florida Education Funders are committed to helping the state build on its new VPK accountability system and then address items beyond that which address continuous quality improvement.

Many of the changes supported by the funders can only be attained with increased governmental funding. The current Florida VPK reimbursement rate of \$2,401 per child ranks 41st of the 44 states with state funded pre-kindergarten programs. While the high utilization rate is to be lauded, this has not translated into a higher kindergarten readiness rate (i.e., with 72% participation rate, the readiness rates is still only 57%). Florida Education Funders support a gradual increase in state appropriations dedicated to the VPK program so that all the necessary quality changes can be implemented to result in increased readiness rates.

Significant improvement in results requires systems change, and this must be data informed. The Florida Education Funders support establishment of a more robust early learning data system which ties seamlessly with Florida’s existing K-12 data system. Additionally, Florida’s fragmented evaluation system must be improved. The passage of HB 419: Early Learning and Early Grade Success during the 2021 legislative session is a step in the right direction. It mandates, in part, “...revising the requirements of the Gold Seal Quality Care program; requiring students enrolled in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program to participate in a specified screening and progress monitoring program...”⁴. Much research has been done on assessment systems and it is instructive to learn from best practices already in place.⁵ Florida’s early learning system should **1)** include high-quality, developmentally appropriate assessments; **2)** inform instruction and support family engagement; and **3)** provide data to strengthen early learning systems.

Five of the 10 NIEER benchmarks for quality involve teacher qualifications, preparation, and professional development. While Florida has many exemplary early childhood teachers in successful programs, there is a need for greater consistency in qualifications and continuous improvement to increase statewide kindergarten readiness. Increased expectations will necessitate higher teacher salaries and increased funding as research has shown in other states.⁶

FPN believes strongly that all of these recommendations must be implemented equitably. An initial step in this direction would be to share more disaggregated data in order to track how equitable kindergarten readiness rates are. While the Florida Scorecard is a good source of readily available information to the general public, it does not disaggregate kindergarten readiness rates beyond the county level.

FPN Positions

- ✓ Policies and practices that support increased kindergarten readiness rates.
- ✓ Adequate funding for a world class system which meets or exceeds NIEER benchmarks.
- ✓ Advocates for a “best in class” evaluation system.
- ✓ Supports for highly qualified teachers.
- ✓ Assure a system that operates equitably.

PHILANTHROPY'S ROLE

Philanthropy has as many roles as there are needs in the community related to early childhood education. Funders working in the early learning space have an obligation to remain informed and to be brokers of accurate information during conversations about policy and practice. Funders are well positioned to facilitate collaboration between governmental agencies, business interests, existing formal programs (e.g., the Florida Chamber Business Alliance for Early Learning), fellow funders, and the general public.

Funders fulfill the traditional roles of thought leaders, providers of financial support for research, in areas of need or championing pilot programs, and public advocates. Funders have the ability to advocate for better public policy based on their unique perspectives and what they've learned as well as to foster public/private partnerships. Early learning involves unique challenges as there is a general underappreciation of its importance to later life success. Philanthropy can assist with increasing awareness to garner support for systems changes as well as improved local practice (e.g., addressing low VPK participation rates in many areas).

Conn Memorial Foundation

Project	Great We Grow in Town and Country
Area Served	Town and Country in Tampa, Florida
Collaborating Organizations	Champions for Children, Rosa Valdez Preschool, Boys and Girls Club, Morgan Woods and Town and Country Elementary Schools
Goal	Kindergarten Readiness and Transition to the public neighborhood schools
Description	Provide a community of practice which includes private and public four-year-old teachers and kindergarten teachers focused on kindergarten readiness which includes a digital platform. Develop on & off campus feeder patterns to strengthen public neighborhood schools.
Funder's Role	Facilitator and funder
Planned Timeframe	Long term
More Information	Creating Educational Pathways for Student Success (connfoundation.org)

Pinellas Education Foundation

Project	Pinellas Early Literacy Initiative
Area Served	Pinellas County, Florida
Collaborating Organizations	Pinellas County Schools, Community Foundation of Tampa Bay, Consortium of Florida Education Foundations, Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg, Riley Education Foundation, Helios Education Foundation, United Way Suncoast
Goal	Support teachers and leaders who are preparing students to be ready for kindergarten and proficient readers by 3rd grade.
Description	School-based teams of principals, assistant principals, and in public PreK, elementary and community-based private PreK school settings participate in a monthly literacy cohort, Communities of Practice, led by the University of Florida's Lastinger Center to implement evidence-based literacy instruction from the instruction and intervention module.
Funder's Role	Facilitator and funder
Planned Timeframe	4 years

ABOUT FPN

The Florida Philanthropic Network is a statewide association of grantmakers working to build philanthropy for a better Florida. FPN's members are private independent, corporate and family foundations, community foundations, public charity grantmakers and corporate giving programs - from Miami to Jacksonville; Naples to Pensacola - who hold over \$6.5 billion in assets and invest over \$430 million annually in Florida to improve the quality of life for our citizens. Our members share a commitment to promoting philanthropy, fostering collaboration and advancing public policy by Florida, in Florida.

FPN's Florida Education Funders are FPN members who share an interest in supporting education issues, organizations and needs in Florida. Convenings of the Florida Education Funders offer a space to learn and share together on improving the state's education outcomes, and to be a voice for Florida philanthropy on key education policy issues.

REFERENCES

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