

POLICY BACKGROUNDER: **EARLY EDUCATION**

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Updated 8/23/2021

Voluntary Free Pre-K

Florida was one of the first states in the nation to offer free pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds regardless of family income. The Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program – or VPK program – was created by a 2002 constitutional [amendment](#) that passed with nearly 60% of the vote after a campaign led by retired Miami Herald publisher David Lawrence Jr. and then-Miami-Dade County Mayor [Alex Penelas](#). The program began in 2005.

The ballot summary read:

Every four-year-old child in Florida shall be offered a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity by the state no later than the 2005 school year. This voluntary early childhood development and education program shall be established according to high quality standards and shall be free for all Florida four-year-olds without taking away funds used for existing education, health and development programs.

Backers worked to get [the measure](#) before voters after [unsuccessful attempts](#) in the Legislature to create such a program in 2001 and 2002. [The program](#) allows families to enroll their children in preschool programs at public schools or private childcare centers. The program is administered by the Florida Department of Education's Office of Early Learning. National [studies have found faults](#) with the quality of the program, but have also said Florida has been a leader in providing access to learning opportunities for all children at that age.

Recent Legislation

2021: Lawmakers passed and Gov. Ron DeSantis signed [HB 419](#), which sets out a timeline for the creation of a new system for measuring how much students are learning in the [Florida Voluntary Pre-K](#) program, after failing to pass a similar effort a year earlier. The legislation requires [development of a program](#) that tracks learning gains and creates an

evaluation tool for VPK providers. "When I took office, our kindergarten readiness rate was 42% – that number is unacceptable," DeSantis said in a [press release](#) on signing the bill. "This legislation will support the thousands of Florida families that rely on our early learning programs to prepare their children for kindergarten by helping identify the support students need." The [governor also signed HB 7011](#), requiring new assessments for early grade students, including those in VPK, using real-time data to track progress more efficiently and assist struggling students. DeSantis said his goal is to have 90% of Florida's third-graders reading on grade level by 2030, while providing more accountability and improving the quality of education in the state.

2020: A [bill that would have made major changes](#) to the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program by requiring additional testing aimed at measuring progress for the young students was considered by the 2020 Legislature but ultimately failed to pass. The proposal ([SB 1688](#)) had several provisions aimed at determining the quality of VPK programs, for example creating a measurement scheme and a score for each VPK provider. Gov. Ron DeSantis had backed the idea of coming up with a better way to measure the quality of VPK classes after [studies found](#) 42% of kids who enrolled in VPK still showed up "unprepared" for kindergarten. The measure's sponsor, [Sen. Gayle Harrell](#), emphasized that the goal wasn't to put more pressure on the young students but to do better evaluations of the VPK providers to make sure taxpayers were getting their money's worth. The bill did get some [criticism](#) for the possibility that it could label very young students as having deficiencies too early.

Additional Information Sources

[Florida Division of Early Learning](#)

[Florida Early Childhood Strategic Plan \(2019\)](#)

[Department of Education Early Learning Page](#)

[National Conference of State Legislatures Prenatal to 3-Year-Old Policy Page](#)

[NCSL Preschool-3rd Grade Education National Legislation Tracker](#)

[Center for American Progress "Early Learning in Florida," \(2016\)](#)

Recent Early Education Policy News

["Another pandemic shift: In many school districts, 1 in 10 kindergartners didn't show up,"](#)

Chalkbeat, 9/22/2020.

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