



POLICY BRIEF

THE FLORIDA VOLUNTARY PRE-KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Florida legislature is currently considering a voucher initiative to create a universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten program for every four year-old by 2005. The National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education (NCSPE), a research institute at Teachers College, Columbia University, has developed a checklist to analyze voucher programs and a widely used framework for analysis. This policy brief outlines the key issues in analyzing the pre-kindergarten voucher program for Florida.

What are the key issues in designing a voucher program?

Voucher programs can be designed in various forms, to meet different educational goals. A full checklist of programmatic questions is included at the end of this document, but there are four key questions to ask of any voucher program:

1. Who is entitled to use the voucher?
2. Which providers are eligible to redeem the voucher?
3. How much is the voucher worth?
4. What is the role of the state in monitoring the voucher system?

What are the possible consequences of the current Florida proposal?

As shown in greater detail in the checklist that follows, the Florida voucher proposal (House Bill 821CS) could have the following consequences:

- *May encourage freedom of choice* – if parents are free to choose across an adequate supply of religious, non-religious, public, private, and non-accredited providers.
- *May promote efficiency of taxpayer resources* – if competition between providers forces them to offer a higher quality service.
- *May reduce efficiency* – if providers are not monitored adequately for financial soundness.
- *May increase financial burdens on the state* – if families who previously paid for pre-K individually now draw on public resources.
- *May undermine equity* – if high-income families gain access to better quality pre-K services relative to lower-income families since parents are allowed to supplement the voucher amount.
- *May discourage social cohesion* – if private providers are not required to promote common values.



What criteria should be used to analyze a voucher program?

There are four criteria for analyzing vouchers programs:

- *Freedom of Choice* – Does the program offer parents choices?
- *Efficiency* – Does the program use resources efficiently?
- *Equity* – Does the program provide equal access for all children?
- *Social Cohesion* – Does the program promote common values for effective citizenship?

However, satisfying one criterion may require a trade-off against other criteria. For example, more regulations to ensure equitable provision of services may reduce parents' freedom of choice or require less efficient allocation of resources.

The following checklist provides a comprehensive set of questions to apply to voucher plans.

Checklist Questions for Voucher Programs

Regulations:

<i>Voucher Activities:</i>	What activities does the voucher cover? What is the duration of the Pre-K program?
<i>Student Eligibility:</i>	Can all students participate, regardless of income? Can students cross districts/counties to participate?
<i>Provider Types:</i>	Are there restrictions on what types of provider may participate in the voucher program? Must these providers be accredited? Are parents who home-school eligible Pre-K providers?
<i>Provider Admissions:</i>	Can Pre-K providers selectively admit voucher applicants or must they enroll students in a non-selective manner (e.g., lottery)?
<i>Provider Services:</i>	Is a standard or partially standardized curriculum required? May providers promote religious or political views during the school day? Are there requirements for physical facilities, staffing, wages, and class size? What employment and certification standards must personnel meet?

Finance:

<i>Voucher Value:</i>	What is the value of the voucher? Is this amount high or low compared to the average price at a private pre-K provider? Does it take account of differential costs across counties? Is it graduated according to educational needs such as special education or bilingual education?
<i>Parental Funds:</i>	Can parents add on to the voucher for Pre-K provision where the fees exceed the value of the voucher?
<i>Pre-K Provider Fees:</i>	Can providers charge fees to parents for specific services? Are they permitted to raise external funds or use other assets?

Support Services:

<i>Information for Parents:</i>	What information are providers required to make public regarding performance, mission, and staffing? Must providers report information about their services in a standardized form? How will this information be disseminated?
<i>State Monitoring:</i>	Will the administering agency perform annual inspections of participating providers? Are participating providers required to demonstrate financial soundness via independent audits or other reporting requirements to the administering agency? Will low-quality providers be closed? How will closure be decided?
<i>Transportation:</i>	Is transportation provided at public or parental expense to ensure access to provision?



What is the design of the proposal (HB 821CS) debated in Florida?

Applying the four criteria—freedom of choice, efficiency, equity and social cohesion—to the Florida proposal shows that the current voucher proposal is controversial across a number of areas. Specifically the proposal:

- allows non-accredited or faith-based providers to participate and receive public funds;
- does not include information on the amount of the voucher available to parents, even though this is critical in analyzing the program;
- does not prohibit schools' selective admission of pre-kindergarten applicants; and
- requires minimal oversight by the state.

Florida House Bill 821CS: Checklist Answers

Regulations:

<i>Voucher Activities:</i>	Recipients may apply the voucher to either (a) 540-hour school year Pre-K program, or (b) 310-hour Pre-K summer school. Parents of age-eligible children may home school and receive a state-provided web-based or book-based curriculum in lieu of the voucher.
<i>Student Eligibility:</i>	All children age four on or before Sept. 1 of the school year are eligible. No geographical boundaries are set.
<i>Provider Types:</i>	Public, private or faith-based schools may participate. A public school graded D or F by FL State may not provide pre-kindergarten services unless there are no other providers in the area. In this case, the failing school may contract out voluntary pre-kindergarten services held at its site.
<i>Provider Admissions:</i>	Pre-K providers can set admissions policies, but must not discriminate based on race, color, or national origin.
<i>Provider Services:</i>	There are no restrictions prohibiting religious or political curriculum. Providers must offer a literacy-based and numeracy-based curriculum that emphasizes phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary. The Agency for Workforce Innovation will make available a curriculum by 12/31/04, but providers are not required to use it. Facilities, class size and staffing are not determined. Teachers must complete a teacher preparation program and participate in the continuing education that is to be made available by June 1, 2005.
<i>Performance:</i>	As a condition of continued participation in the program, schools' students over each 2-year period must perform equal or better than average on the public kindergarten school readiness uniform screening system (to be implemented by 8/1/05 in all Florida public elementary schools).

Finance:

<i>Voucher Value:</i>	Not determined. The voucher is in an amount set by the 2005 Legislature and will be annually adjusted for inflation. There is no indication the voucher will be graduated for differential costs, special education, or bilingual education.
<i>Parental Funds:</i>	Parents can add-on to the value of the voucher.
<i>Pre-K Provider Fees:</i>	There are no restrictions prohibiting raising other sources of income or use of other assets.

Support Services:

<i>Information for Parents:</i>	The Agency for Workforce Innovation is responsible for maintaining profiles of providers. Specific information is not determined.
<i>State Monitoring:</i>	Annual inspections are not required. To continue to participate in the program, providers' students over each 2-year period must perform equal or better than average on the public kindergarten school readiness uniform screening system (to be implemented by 8/1/05 in all Florida public elementary schools).
<i>Transportation:</i>	Parents are responsible for transportation, unless the child is eligible for subsidized services through the School Readiness Program.