

# An Analysis of Florida's Voluntary Pre-K Program

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## **Abstract**

On January 2, 2005, Governor Jeb Bush signed House Bill 1-A (HB 1A) into law, which created Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Program. Using the policy instruments of regulation, finance, and support services, the VPK program is analyzed. The likely consequences of the VPK program on the criteria of freedom of choice, productive efficiency, equity, and social cohesion based on specific benchmarks are predicted using the analysis of the policy instruments. The Florida VPK program appears to favor the principles of freedom of choice and efficiency at the expense of equity and social cohesion.

## Background

Families of preschool aged children have long been considered the principal agents responsible for their care. In recent years however, this view has been changing as people believe that there is some public benefit in ensuring that all children are prepared for school. Two main reasons for this shift are the increase of participation of the mothers of young children in the workforce and the increasing recognition that early childhood education contributes to school readiness (Magenheim, 2001).

Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment in November of 2002 that required a voluntary prekindergarten (Pre-K) program to be available for all four year olds by fall 2005. On January 2, 2005, Governor Jeb Bush signed House Bill 1-A (HB 1A) into law, which allows parents of four-year-old children to choose an approved Pre-K service provider<sup>1</sup>.

The Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program is considered a voucher program because it allows public schools, non-profit agencies, sectarian institutions, and for-profit agencies to compete for students and their vouchers. Advocates for vouchers claim that families need more choices and that competition among schools will increase the productive efficiency of schools. Opponents of vouchers believe that vouchers will lead to greater inequities in educational experiences among students, a decrease in the common experiences needed for social cohesion of a democratic society, and minimal if any improvements in the productive efficiency of schools (Levin, 2002). In this paper, the VPK program is analyzed using the policy instruments of regulation, finance, and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless other wise noted, the information in the introduction, regulation, finance, and support services section comes from House of Representatives Staff Analysis of HB 1A (2004).

support services. The likely consequences of the VPK program on the criteria of freedom of choice, productive efficiency, equity, and social cohesion based on specific benchmarks are predicted using the analysis of the policy instruments.

## **Regulation**

Two main agencies are required by HB 1A to regulate the VPK program. The Florida Department of Education (DOE) is responsible for creating performance standards, recommending curricula, providing professional development, and educational accountability requirements. The Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) is responsible for the operational requirements of the program including the state-level coordination of the 30 newly created early learning coalitions. Reorganizing the school readiness coalitions into 30 or fewer coalitions will form these new coalitions, each serving at least 2,000 children. VPK programs are to be administered locally by early learning coalitions and school districts.

All children residing in Florida who are four years of age on or before September 1<sup>st</sup> are eligible to participate in the program. A child remains eligible until the beginning of the school year when s/he is eligible for kindergarten. A child is permitted to participate in only one of the VPK programs. If a child has completed less than 10 percent of a Pre-K program, s/he may be allowed to withdraw from a program and enroll in a different program for “good cause.” A child who has completed more than 10 percent of a program but experiences an “extreme hardship” may also be entitled to reenroll in a Pre-K program. A parent may select any participating provider in the county or multi-county region served by the local early learning coalition.

Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) provides 540 hours of prekindergarten instruction during the regular school year or 300 hours during the summer before a child starts kindergarten. The way the hours are divided up is for the provider to decide. This may include any combination of weekdays or weekends. The hour requirement is a minimum. In an effort to meet the needs of their clientele, providers may offer additional hours.

Providers may be public schools or private providers including religious institutions. All providers must register with the early learning coalition. A provider may decide whether or not to admit a child as long as it complies with federal antidiscrimination requirements for both the child and the parent/s.

Private providers must be accredited by one of three private school accreditation associations, hold a Gold Seal Quality Care designation, or be licensed and able to prove that the provider meets all necessary requirements. Additionally, all private schools must be a licensed care facility, a nonpublic school exempt from licensure, or a faith-based child care provider exempt from licensure.

Public schools wanting to provide VPK must be in compliance with Florida's class-size reduction requirements and in good financial standing for future compliance with these requirements. This is to assure that classrooms that should be designated for class-size reduction efforts are not used for Pre-K. There is no financial soundness requirement for private providers.

All school year Pre-K classes must have no less than 4 students and no more than 18. Classes with 11 or more children are required to have a second instructor. Summer Pre-K classes are restricted to between 4 and 10 children. AWI may not limit the number

of classes served by a provider as long as the provider does not go over the student-instructor ratio or square footage requirements.

For the first two years, each provider may select or design its own curriculum; however, the curriculum must be developmentally appropriate, designed to meet the Pre-K performance standards and prepare students for the statewide kindergarten screening. There are no restrictions at this time on whether or not a provider may promote religious or political views. The screening will be part of the reported rating system for each Pre-K provider (described later). Any provider failing to meet the minimum rate of students passing the kindergarten screening test for two years will be put on probation status and required to adopt a Florida DOE approved curriculum. If a provider is unable to meet the passing rate after two years of being on probation, it will be closed down.

For each Pre-K class, one instructor must have: a recognized credential for working with children, or an associate's or higher degree in early childhood education or a related field, or an associate's degree in an unrelated field with six credit hours of early childhood coursework and 480 hours of related experience. Each instructor must complete a five-hour emergent literacy training course. The requirements for the summer Pre-K program are more rigorous; one instructor must be a certified Florida teacher or have a bachelor's degree or higher in early education or a related field. A legislative goal for the 2013-2014 school year is that each Pre-K class will have at least one instructor with a bachelor's degree or higher. The bill further requires the director of each private Pre-K provider to have a DOE-approved Pre-K director credential by the 2006-2007 school year. The standards for this credential have not yet been determined by the DOE.

Providers must screen all instructors by conducting a background check, which must include fingerprinting and criminal records checks.

Parents enrolling children in a VPK program must agree to follow the provider's attendance policy. Each school must provide the parent with a copy of the attendance policy. Additionally, a parent must sign a form each month to verify his/her child's attendance record and to certify that he/she chooses for the payments to continue to be directed to the provider. These forms are to be available for inspection by the early learning coalition for up to two years.

## **Finance**

AWI will distribute funds to each private provider and public school district based on the number of students. Although the value of the voucher has yet to be determined by the Legislature, Governor Bush has recommended a base allocation of \$2,500 per student (Agency for Workforce Innovation, 2005a), regardless of family income or educational needs (examples: special or bilingual education). The value is the same for all providers for both the school year program and the summer program. To account for the different costs of living from one county to the next, the base amount will be multiplied by a county's cost differential.

Providers are not allowed to charge for registration fees or require parents to pay for any additional services; however, providers are allowed to charge fees for programs that are not part of Florida's VPK program. There is no mention of start-up funds for providers. However, the bill does not restrict providers from raising any additional funds.

## **Support Services**

Under this bill, the early learning coalitions must provide parents enrolling children in the VPK program with a profile of each Pre-K provider (both public and private). This profile must include the provider's: services, curriculum, instructor credentials, instructor-student ratio, and the most recent kindergarten readiness rate. The format requirements and forms of dissemination to parents are to be determined by AWI. The DOE will administer statewide screening of kindergarteners and calculate the kindergarten readiness rate for each provider.

Any provider that does not meet the minimum kindergarten readiness rate (to be determined by the DOE) for one year must submit a plan for improvement to the early learning coalition or school district. If this happens for two consecutive years, the provider will be placed on probation and must take specific corrective actions including the use of a DOE approved curriculum. If a school is on probation for two consecutive years, it will be closed down. Early learning coalitions are responsible for ensuring that providers are in compliance with the regulations of the VPK program.

The VPK program does not provide funds for transportation. Providers may choose to offer transportation to families. If providers choose to provide transportation, the funding must come out of their own budget.

## **BENCHMARKS**

There are many types of voucher programs and each influences education in different ways. To examine the Florida VPK Program, I will apply Henry Levin's (2002) comprehensive framework for the analysis of voucher programs. The framework

employs four criteria– freedom of choice, productive efficiency, equity and social cohesion–to analyze the regulation, finance and social services provisions individual voucher initiatives. Before providing my analysis, I will first define each criterion.

## **Freedom of Choice**

### **Regulation**

Privatization plans with an emphasis on the freedom of choice for parents include a wide variety of schools for parents to choose from. These schools may be religious schools, public schools, or schools with a specialized curriculum. Plans with an emphasis on choice do not restrict parents to particular location zones based on residency. Under a plan that stresses choice, schools are allowed to select their own curriculum as long as minimal requirements are met. Too many curricular requirements may result in homogenous schools, as well as cause a substantial number of schools to decline to participate in a given voucher program (Friedman, 1962). Schools must have lottery style admission processes to ensure that all students have equal choice (Levin, 1991).

Plans that emphasize freedom of choice for schools allow schools to have their own admission requirements. These plans have minimal government requirements regarding the academic and personnel components of the school (Friedman, 1962).

### **Support Services**

In order to promote greater choice, transportation is provided (Levin, 1991). Without transportation, some families will be limited to choosing schools in their immediate neighborhood only; this would seriously reduce the choices available to these families.

Privatization plans with freedom of choice as a goal have many sources of information for parents (Levin, 1991). Sources may include but are not limited to websites, mailings, information centers, phone calls, and advertisements on television, radio, billboards, and in the newspaper. All of these forms of information dissemination should be available in different languages, as well as in forms for people with disabilities.

#### Finance

The value of the voucher should be higher than the average tuition of private schools in plans with an emphasis on choice. This ensures that participating students have a wide pool of schools to choose from.

#### **Efficiency**

In education, productive efficiency refers to the relationship between resources and their educational impact (Levin, 2002). In considering this relationship, it is important to bear in mind both the costs and the outcomes of education.

#### **Finance and Support Services**

Efficiency plans focused on minimizing costs have minimal government regulation and support services in order to keep costs down. Government funds spent on the regulation of curricula, standards, personnel, admissions, facilities, students, and attendance are only a small percentage of the total amount spent on education. The same holds true for support services such as transportation and information dissemination (Levin, 1991). With low overhead costs, more funding goes towards the actual provision of education.

## **Regulation**

Privatization plans attempting to maximize outcomes while all schools start with similar inputs count on competition between schools to increase outcomes. There is great diversity among schools. Schools compete for students by catering to their needs. High performing schools are in demand while low performing schools struggle to keep their doors open and may close due to low demand.

Plans with either of these productive efficiency goals have some form of measurement to detect whether or not schools are producing the intended outcomes. The measurement tool or assessment should be the same for all schools involved. Test scores are the most common measurement of student progress. The assessment should be administered in both the beginning and the end of the year to measure not only the end result but also the improvement.

## **Equity**

When discussing the issue of equity, it is important to determine for whom it is being considered. Some plans may be concerned with equity for students with disabilities, others may be concerned with students attending failing schools, and some may be concerned with students of low-income families.

## **Regulation**

Plans with an emphasis on equity for these groups of students have some key components. Open admission policies such as lotteries are included in these plans to ensure that children are not discriminated against based on the income or education of

their family, their residence, race, and/or prior tests scores. Residence is not a determinant of the schools a family may select for their children.

### **Support Services**

Access to school is a concern in plans that emphasize equity. These plans include funds for transportation. Low-income families are the least likely to have access to transportation, thereby limiting their selection of schools to their neighbor hoods (Levin, 1991). They also consider the schedules of working families and offer hours or services to meet their needs (Magenheim, 2001). Information dissemination is an important component of equity plans. Possible forms of dissemination are described above in the freedom of choice section. Parents who have higher SES are more likely to have access to resources of information; therefore, many attempts are made to reach out to people of lower-SES.

### **Finance**

Larger vouchers are available for students of low-income homes and students with disabilities in order to provide incentives for schools to accept them and take the steps necessary to meet their needs (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Levin, 1991). This condition also improves the choices available to these students if some schools are allowed to charge more than others for tuition. Parents are not allowed to add-on to the voucher in plans that stress equity. This ensures that students of high-income families do not have access to superior educational opportunities. Schools are not allowed to receive additional funds from outside sources in equity-based plans in order to prevent large disparities between schools.

## **Social Cohesion**

### **Regulation**

The goal of privatization plans with an emphasis on social cohesion is to provide students with a common educational experience so that someday as adults, they will contribute to our society's social, political, and economic institutions (Levin, 2002). Plans with a focus on social cohesion have specific requirements for schools to meet in an effort to ensure a common experience.

Some provisions of social cohesion plans include: standards, a common curriculum, and testing (Levin, 2002). These ensure that schools are providing the elements the state or local education agency determines are necessary in society. Plans also include restrictions on the primary language of instruction to be used (Levin, 1991).

In a social cohesion plan, efforts are taken to avoid social stratification. An open admissions policy is one way to accomplish this.

### **Finance**

Another way to deter social stratification is not to permit parents to add-on to vouchers; thereby creating a system of the "haves" and the "have-nots."

### **Support Services**

In a plan that stresses social cohesion, transportation is provided as a way to minimize localism. This ensures that students are able to interact with students from other districts and neighborhoods.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Florida's VPK Program and Freedom of Choice**

It appears that the VPK program will meet many of the requirements of a plan with a focus on the freedom of choice. This bill allows parents to choose from a wide variety of schools including religious and public schools. Parents are allowed to choose schools anywhere in their county or multi-county vicinity. Parents can select the school year or summer program. Further adding to the choices parents have, providers may choose or design their own curricula unless they fail to meet the minimum rate of students passing the kindergarten screening test. According to D.N. Harris (2004) of Florida State University, there are currently about 60,000 students enrolled in Pre-K in Florida. Based on Georgia's 70% participation rate in its voluntary Pre-K program, he further estimates that 92,000 additional children will enroll in Pre-K in the upcoming school year. This may cause some problems in the short run, as the supply of providers may limit the choices that parents have. In the long run the supply should catch up with demand.

According to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF)(2005), the average annual costs of center-based childcare for a four-year old in Florida is \$4,255. The base allotment amount for the VPK program is about \$2,500 per child for a minimum number of hours of instruction, not a year of Pre-K. In comparison to CDF's average annual cost calculation, the VPK allotment is slightly above the average for the hours of service to be provided. This will have the effect of offering more choice to participating families. The comparison of these two amounts should be taken with caution as one is for center-based childcare and one is for the provision of Pre-K. There is a difference between the two (for more information, see Magenheim, 2001).

Three aspects of the VPK program may limit the choice available to parents. First, no funds are allotted for transportation, thereby, severely limiting the choices of some parents. Second, Florida has yet to determine the way it is going to disseminate information about the providers so parents can make informed choices. Hopefully they will follow some of the benchmarks described earlier in this paper. Third, many parents may not spend a lot of time researching Pre-K providers due to the short provision of time allotted for the VPK program.

Providers are allowed to select their students, giving providers more choice but reducing choice for parents. The option to design or select their own curricula gives providers more choice. The limited personnel requirements specified by the bill also increase the choices available to providers. Based on these elements, all providers will have a large degree of choice in the short run. In the long run, some providers will be subject to curriculum and corrective plans that will reduce the amount of choice they have. The goal of having a teacher with a bachelor's degree or higher in each Pre-K class by the 2013-2014 school year will further reduce the choices providers have in the long run.

Another issue that may cause a decrease in the number of choices a provider has or a decrease in providers is the Florida Constitution. Section 3, Article I prohibits the spending of public money to aid any church, sect, religious domination, or sectarian institution. The VPK program may experience a legal challenge as a result of this article. As an example, the First District Court of Appeal held that the Florida Opportunity Scholarship Program violated the "no-aid" provision of the State Constitution in *Bush v. Holmes* because the program uses state money to support sectarian schools. This case is

currently pending before the Florida Supreme Court and has the possibility of being reviewed by the United States Supreme Court to determine if the “no aid” provision violates the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. (Date, 2004; House of Representatives, 2004).

### **Florida’s VPK Program and Efficiency**

The Florida Legislature claims that the creation of the VPK program will only create 42.5 new state jobs and use no more than five percent of the funds for administrative expenses. With 92,000 additional four-year-olds expected (Harris, 2004) to participate in publicly funded Pre-K this year and many new providers, it is hard to believe that only 42.5 new government employees will be needed. The costs of the personnel necessary to regulate: the credentials of teachers, the accreditation of providers, class sizes, adjudication situations, providers failing to meet the kindergarten screening test passing rate, the administering of tests, and student attendance must be further considered. Additionally, E. Magenheim (2001) suggests that with the increasing demand for Pre-K and the increase in teacher certification requirements, the costs of Pre-K can be expected to rise. The costs described above may decrease the efficiency of this plan.

With the exception of some low-income families, Pre-K has been a private responsibility for families in terms of funding. With the VPK program, many families who would have paid for Pre-K will now rely on the state to pay for it. This shift from private payment to government subsidy will increase the costs of the VPK program.

The allowances for providers to accept funding from other sources and to use their own facilities may make this plan more efficient for the state of Florida. Both of these provisions will provide students with educational resources, but not at the expense of the state. The hour requirements and summer option allow providers to offer many Pre-K classes with minimal funding for rent or capital outlays. For example, a provider could offer two half-day school year classes and one summer class in the same classroom. This is also beneficial for hiring purposes, as it will enable a provider to employ one teacher as opposed to three.

There is no mention of how much money will be spent on information dissemination. If it is a small amount, the consequence will be that non-instructional costs are kept down so that money is available for educational purposes. Funding for transportation is not provided, which will keep costs down or leave more money for the actual provision of education. Both of these elements will reduce the choices parents have.

The VPK program will rely on both competition and regulation as it attempts to maximize the rate of students passing the statewide kindergarten screening test. In the short run, providers offering diverse programs will compete for students using their passing rates and abilities to meet parental preferences. In this way, competition should weed out schools that have low passing rates or fail to meet parental demands. It is unclear at this time if the providers failing to meet the passing rate for two years in a row will receive a label such as “provider in need of improvement.” If so, these schools may have difficulties attracting students in the long run.

In a study of the effects of competition among providers in Georgia's universal Pre-K program, G.T. Henry and C. S. Gordon (2003) found that private and public providers react differently to competition. They found that in response to competition, private providers modestly increase math and reading scores on the third grade statewide tests; while, public schools lower retention rates and increase school readiness. To capture some of the social and behavioral skills, which are not addressed by standardized tests, school readiness was measured using teacher ratings of students at the end of each school year for kindergarten through third grade. The authors also found that competition increases retention for at-risk children but increases their test scores. Competition in Florida's VPK program may have similar results.

A statewide kindergarten screening test will be used to assess whether a provider is preparing students for school. Currently in the process of being developed, it will be required of all public schools enrolling kindergarteners. Assuming that the tests are aligned with the Pre-K standards and developmentally appropriate, this measurement effort meets a benchmark of plans with an emphasis on efficiency. A concern is that without a pre-test, there is no way to measure and demonstrate improvement, which should be more important than the end outcome. Some schools will receive many children at four-years-old who already know all of their letters. If an assessment of letter knowledge is given to a five year-old student, it will not necessarily measure the instructional abilities of the provider.

The website for Florida's Agency for Workforce Innovation for Pre-K (2005b) states that research shows that:

“high-quality preschool education can substantially increase children's chances of succeeding in school and in life. Children who attend high quality

prekindergarten programs are less likely to be held back a grade, less likely to need special education and more likely to graduate high school. They are less involved in crime and delinquency. They also earn more as adults and are less likely to become dependent on welfare.”

Research on both the Perry Pre-K and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) are included as sources. Both of these programs had cost savings of over \$7.00 for each dollar invested, but both programs had characteristics that differ from the VPK program. For example, both of these programs provided family services and employed teachers with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and early childhood certification. Neither of these programs was universal and the two programs had much higher costs. Also, Perry Pre-K had student-to-teacher ratios of five to one (Barnett, 1996; Reynolds et al. 2002). The VPK program will most likely have reduced long run benefits in comparison to these programs.

### **Florida’s VPK Program and Equity**

Equity issues for low-income families and children with disabilities will be considered in this section. For both of these aspects, the Florida VPK program does not meet the benchmarks of equity described above.

The amount of the voucher in Florida differs only by county cost of living differentials. Without vouchers of larger amounts than other students, providers may view students of poor families as risks because of the well-studied relationship between low academic performance and poverty. If they had a larger voucher, providers would have an incentive to accept them and give them the services they need to succeed.

Provisions for students with disabilities are not mentioned in HB 1A. According to the Florida State Board of Education's Universal Prekindergarten Education Council Advisory Council (2003), local school districts must provide all children with disabilities aged 3 to 21 with a free appropriate public education. In late 2002, 11,469 four-year-old children in Florida were receiving services. This advisory council reported that 41% of these students were served in a special education setting, 40% were served in a special education setting part-time and the rest of the time they were served in a regular setting, and 13% were serviced in a regular setting. Due to Federal laws and funding for special education services, the VPK program will not interfere with the services students receive. There is no incentive however, for a provider to accept a student who attends a special education setting part-time or a student who receives services at a regular setting. This may pose an equity problem for students with disabilities as providers may view them as risks. Students with disabilities often require more attention than general education students. Without larger vouchers for students with disabilities, a provider cannot hire additional personnel to work with them. Unfortunately, Pre-K students are not eligible for the McKay Scholarships Program, Florida's voucher program for students with disabilities. One of the requirements is that students must be in grades K-12 (Florida Department of Education, 2003).

Some students of low-income families and students with disabilities may find not be able to find a Pre-K program that will accept them. This may lead to a legal battle with new admissions regulations as a result.

Although the bill states that fees are not allowed for services given during the VPK hours, it does not prohibit charging for additional services as long as they are not

required. This is a concern because many providers may choose to offer half-day VPK programs and charge fees for the remaining hours of the day. Some providers may charge high fees, which, many low-income families cannot afford. Depending on how high the fees are for additional services, there may be large differences for students based on the incomes of their families with respect to teacher quality, activities offered, and field trip experiences. High fees for additional services will most likely deter many families from even applying to certain Pre-K programs. The VPK program also allows providers to accept funds from outside sources. This will have the effect of some providers having large budgets as a result of additional funds collected and others having very limited budgets, which is inequitable.

When considering privatization plans for Pre-K, the needs of working parents and the needs of the children must be considered (Magenheim, 2001). The VPK plan states the minimum hours a provider must give students services to receive the funding for the voucher; it does not prohibit the provider from offering more. A provider may find it very marketable to offer 900 hours of service for the voucher. Using this provider, a parent may dramatically reduce the amount paid for childcare. This may pose a quality issue. Teachers salaries are likely to be minimal, which, will attract teachers with minimal qualifications. The funds available for educational materials and activities are also likely to be minimal. It is likely that these providers will not have high passing rates on the kindergarten screening tests; however, due to the high costs of childcare, low-income parents may not have other options. These providers will be able to operate for four years without the risk of being closed down. However, they will be subject to other probationary measures in the meanwhile.

Although the VPK program does not provide funds for transportation, it does not prohibit providers from offering it. Families with limited access to transportation will be forced to choose from providers in their neighborhood or providers with transportation options. These families are likely to have low-incomes and live in low-income areas. This is problematic for equity because a family seeking the benefits of the contextual effects of providers with higher-income families will be trapped with their neighborhood provider. Their other option is to get a provider who offers transportation; however, like the hours topic discussed earlier there is a trade-off. Unless a provider is using additional private funds, the use of funds towards transportation will result in less money spent on the quality of education and it is less likely that higher-income families will choose such a provider. If providers charge for transportation, some low-income families will not be able to afford it. This is problematic for both parents seeking out-of-the-neighborhood experiences for their children and those living in rural areas. This may create stratification and negative peer effects for students of poor families.

The VPK program includes empowering families as one of its leading principles. “The program ensures widespread dissemination of and easy access to information helpful to making good choices among opportunities available (House of Representatives, 2004, p. 4).” Also, the early learning coalitions are required to provide parents with a profile of each provider in a specific format. Specifics regarding information dissemination are not available at this time. It remains possible that several sources of information dissemination will be used; however, it appears that the VPK program is reluctant to spend Pre-K funds on services outside of the per pupil allotment. This is evident with both the lack of transportation funding and the low percentage to be

used for the administration and regulation of this program by the state. With low funding for information dissemination, it is unlikely that there will be an abundance of special information services for disadvantaged parents to make informed choices for their children or even be aware of the program. This will reduce equity for their children.

### **Florida's VPK Program and Social Cohesion**

The VPK program meets some of the social cohesion benchmarks because of the statewide kindergarten screening test requirement and the development of Pre-K standards. Although a common curriculum is not specified, providers will need to address specific skills and subject matter for their students to pass the screening test. School readiness is the major goal of the VPK program.

Although HB-1A does not specify any bilingual instructor requirements or the language to be used for the kindergarten screening test, the AWI website ([www.upkflorida.org](http://www.upkflorida.org)) has tabs for Spanish, Creole, and English. Furthermore, an update on their website states that materials for providers have been distributed in all three languages. There may be some difficulties for children attending a Pre-K provider with instruction in one language and then kindergarten in a neighborhood school with instruction in another language. This does not meet the social cohesion benchmark for language.

As described in the equity section about the VPK program, social stratification may occur due to the equal allotments of the vouchers, the admission policies that providers may adopt, the allowance of parents to pay for after-hour services, and the

option for providers to accept additional funding. These factors will cause large differences in quality between providers.

The absence of funding for transportation for the VPK program may also have adverse effects on social cohesion. Many families may find themselves restricted to choosing schools that are close to their home, which may increase localism.

Social cohesion may not seem like an important topic due to the short duration of the VPK program for young children and the fact that most of them will go onto public school. Furthermore, many students went to private Pre-K in the past. However, it is important to consider the effects that differences in the quality of Pre-K may have in the long run. For many children, Pre-K will serve as their academic foundation. Having a high quality program helps give them the skills they need to feel and be successful in school. Children without this early start may not be prepared for school. This is both an equity and social cohesion issue as early literacy and school readiness are goals of the VPK program.

For many parents, participation in the VPK program will be the first opportunity they have to exercise choice in education. Parents may enjoy this experience and request it for future educational decisions regarding their children. As a result, the VPK program has the potential to fuel a choice movement for all K-12 schools, especially in Florida where there are already other voucher programs in operation.

## **CONCLUSION**

No voucher plan can meet all four goals of freedom of choice, efficiency, equity, and social cohesion, there are always trade-offs (Levin, 2002). The Florida VPK

program appears to favor the principles of freedom of choice and efficiency at the expense of equity and social cohesion.

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