

Pre-Ks fizzle out along with money [US-FL]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Pre-kindergarten programs in Florida's public schools are so strapped for money that some may close this year -- just as the state gears up to pay for pre-K classes for all 4-year-olds.

By summer, 25 school districts could be out of the state system created to run pre-K and other "school-readiness" programs, according to the Florida Association of District School Superintendents.

In Central Florida, pre-K classes in Lake, Polk and Volusia counties are running deficits that range from \$200,000 to \$500,000. With Florida in an economic squeeze this year, there is little money in district or state coffers to help them out.

School officials say that if they close their programs now, it's unlikely they'll jump in again in 2005, when funding for universal pre-K is slated to begin. The job of helping prepare Florida's youngest children to learn could fall increasingly to private operators, including day-care centers.

It's a depressing turn for many backers of the constitutional amendment that requires the state to provide preschool for all 4-year-olds. The measure's passage in November put Florida at the forefront of the national effort to improve early-childhood education.

Experts say getting all children reading by age 9 -- the new mantra of education reform -- means paying attention to the preschool years, when children should develop the critical skills that serve as literacy's foundation.

Instead of planning for new state dollars and increased enrollments, many school pre-K officials say they've spent this year trying to keep their current programs afloat, aimed solely at low-income children.

"We're all just struggling with this," said Sue Canning, Volusia's coordinator of pre-K services. "It's a shame."

For 16 years, most of Florida's 67 school districts ran pre-K programs designed to help poor kids prepare for school. They didn't face financial problems, they said, until the state changed how it paid for the program.

In 1999, Florida legislators merged all government programs for low-income children 5 and under and gave the Florida Partnership for School Readiness the task of getting them ready for school.

Officials estimated then that about one-quarter of Florida's kindergartners started school not knowing the ABCs, shapes, colors or other preschool basics. The hope was that pulling together all early-childhood programs -- health care, child care and preschool education -- would help more kids start school ready to learn.

The partnership serves 168,000 children from infants to school age each month, according to its 2002 annual report.

Schools complain that the new system provides less money per student than before and also makes it harder to enroll children. Some of the neediest kids, such as children of migrant workers, became ineligible because their parents did not meet work requirements designed to cut welfare rolls.

School officials complain that preschool has been turned into a component of welfare reform.

With the state facing billion-dollar shortfalls, few expect to see any more money for pre-K this year. The Legislature may do little more than order a study of the readiness system, which some lawmakers want to run universal pre-K.

Officials in Collier County decided they can't wait. They'll stop offering pre-K at the end of this school year. Volusia officials, facing a \$425,000 deficit, will decide soon what to do.

Districts value pre-K but face a difficult choice balancing it against the drain on their finances, said Bill Kelly, Volusia's assistant superintendent for financial services.

David Lawrence, the former Miami Herald publisher who helped lead the pre-K drive, said the amendment's backers expected public schools to be a "major participant" because they benefit when children are better-prepared.

"The light at the end of the tunnel is very bright, and it's getting closer," said Lawrence, chairman of the partnership. "Shame on the person and shame on the district that would say, 'Times are tough, so I'm dropping out of this.' "

Sens. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, and Anna Cowin, R-Leesburg, said they wouldn't be too worried if some school districts drop the preschool business.

They expect universal pre-K in Florida to be run like Georgia's system, in which public schools and private providers offer state-approved pre-K classes, and parents choose which, if any, they want their children to attend.

That means not all districts need to participate, they said. What's more, with money tight and another amendment requiring caps on class sizes in the next few years, districts may not have space for pre-K classes, Constantine said.

State officials estimate about 70 percent of Florida's 4-year-olds will take advantage of universal pre-K. That means the readiness system, if given the job of running the program, could be serving 130,000 additional children in 2005.

Current readiness rules let low-income parents choose where to place their kids. Options range from public-school pre-K to private preschools to day-care centers to the baby-sitting services of relatives.

It infuriates public-school officials that these other providers would be funded while their programs, with college-educated teachers, shrink or close.

Orange and Osceola were among 13 counties that opted not to run their pre-K programs within the state system this year. They're paying for it with a limited pot of federal money, however, and enrolled fewer children. In Orange, enrollment dropped by 1,000.

Seminole's pre-K is surviving because of a \$500,000 donation from the Seminole County Commission that has helped it enroll kids who don't qualify under readiness rules. It hopes to hang on next year, as does Lake, despite a \$200,000 deficit.

Streamlined rules should let more children enroll in school-based pre-K next year, said Katherine Kamiya, executive director of the readiness partnership. Some problems won't disappear without legislative changes, she said.

About half of the partnership's \$681 million budget comes from federal child-care money. It isn't enough to cover the cost of public-school programs, Kamiya said.

Butch Cronon, owner of an Orlando private school and a member of the readiness committee, blames some district problems on unwillingness to change with the new system, but he also says the state has not provided enough money.

"Don't design a \$12,000-a-year program and fund it with \$3,000 a year and expect a \$12,000-a-year program," he said. "You can only get so much for your dollar."

- reprinted from The Orlando Sentinel.

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