

Color them enthusiastic: Politicians embrace pre-K [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Four-year-olds -- pint-sized lovers of dinosaurs, dolls and drawing -- are politically hot this year.

On Election Day, Florida voters will decide whether to make free, "high-quality" pre-kindergarten classes available to all 4-year-old children in the state.

The proposal, Amendment 8 on the ballot, has the support of both Republican Gov. Jeb Bush and Democratic challenger Bill McBride. It faces no organized opposition, and polls show a large majority of voters plan to vote for it.

If they do, they will push Florida to the forefront of a national effort to improve early-childhood education.

Many education experts insist quality preschool programs are a key piece of education reform because they reach children at a critical time in their development and prepare them for formal schooling.

That's crucial in Florida, they say, where academic performance lags and large numbers of poor children, who typically struggle the most, attend public schools.

Now, pre-K programs in Florida are available to children whose parents can afford private preschool or day care, and to some poor kids who qualify for the federal Head Start program or Florida's "school readiness" program. Currently, about a third of Florida's 187,000 4-year-olds are served by the state, while up to 15 percent more are in private programs.

Both of the subsidized programs, however, have long waiting lists. In Orange County alone, Head Start, which serves 3- and 4-year-olds, has nearly 400 children on its waiting list, and the state program more than 3,800, though that figure includes children from birth to age 12, not just preschool-age kids.

Georgia was the first state to adopt a universal pre-kindergarten program open to all 4-year-olds whose parents want them to attend. Since then, the District of Columbia and five other states -- Louisiana, New York, Oklahoma, West Virginia and Maryland -- have passed universal pre-K laws, though money shortages have limited implementation, said Kristie Kauerz, early-learning program director at Education Commission of the States in Denver.

A NATIONAL LEADER

"If Florida pulls this off," Kauerz said, "they'll definitely be one of the leaders of the nation."

If Amendment 8 passes, Florida would start universal pre-K in 2005. The program would cost an estimated \$400 million to \$650 million a year, a cost that, while not insignificant, many state leaders say is manageable. The money would be divided between the state and local school districts, the way kindergarten through 12th-grade funding is now.

The free, voluntary pre-K classes would be open to all 4-year-olds, regardless of family income.

DETAILS TO BE WORKED OUT

The details about how Florida's pre-K program would work, and how it would be paid for, would be hashed out by the Legislature, if the amendment passes.

Supporters envision a system in which the state would set pre-K standards but both public elementary schools and private day-care centers and preschools could offer the classes. Parents would choose which, if any, type of class they want for their children.

The Florida Partnership for School Readiness, established in 1999, now has the task of getting children from poverty ready for school. But limited funding, and what critics say is a tendency to favor cheaper day care over more expensive but more academic public-school pre-K, has made it a controversial program.

Florida officials estimate the pre-K classes would enroll, as Georgia's do, about 70 percent of the eligible 4-year-olds, or about 152,000

children in the first year.

David Lawrence, the partnership chairman, said the pre-K amendment is the next "crucial" step in Florida's efforts to boost school readiness. If it passes, the Legislature must ensure Florida's pre-K classes are top-notch.

"Unless we do this with quality, we haven't done anything for children at all," Lawrence said. "It's not warehousing, not storage, not baby-sitting. It's making sure there is quality."

The expense of that worried legislators -- who refused to act on universal pre-kindergarten bills for years. Some voters are concerned too.

FINANCIAL RESEARVATIONS

"It's going to cost a lot of money, I feel, and I don't feel like paying more taxes," said Inge FitzGerald of Melbourne.

Like others, FitzGerald also opposes the amendment because she thinks young children belong at home with their parents.

"I don't think the government needs to get involved with our families."

But FitzGerald is in the minority according to recent opinion surveys that show the measure is supported by more than 60 percent of voters.

"I'm not surprised," said Alex Penelas, mayor of Miami-Dade County and chairman of the group spearheading the pre-K drive. "I really struggled to come up with reasons why people would be opposed."

Two recent studies suggest that's true.

A study released in September by University of Michigan researchers found that America's disadvantaged youngsters start kindergarten significantly behind their wealthier classmates -- with the most disadvantaged kids scoring 60 percent below those at the top of the socioeconomic scale on oral pre-reading and pre-math tests.

This "inequality at the starting gate" could be at least partially offset by attending preschool or a child-care center, the study found, yet the most disadvantaged children are the least likely to attend. About 65 percent of the students in the highest socioeconomic group attend compared with 20 percent of those in the lowest group, said David Burkam, one of the researchers.

A study released last year by researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that poor children who attended public preschools in Chicago 15 years later had higher high-school graduation rates and lower rates of special-education services and juvenile delinquency than similar children who didn't attend preschool.

And for every dollar spent on the preschools, more than \$7 was returned to society in reduced crime and need for special services and increased tax revenue, said Arthur Reynolds, a social-work professor and the study's director.

TEACHER'S VIEW

Pre-K teacher Amy Pylant is convinced of that.

The Rosemont Elementary teacher spends her days with 4-year-olds who live in poverty. She teaches the youngsters in a colorful classroom with a curriculum designed to immerse them in songs, reading and other "language-rich" activities they likely don't get at home.

"I learn books," explained 4-year-old Tyra Smith, one of 18 students in the class.

"This is what I love," Pylant said.

"The growth you will see at the end of your year, your heart just bursts."

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