



***The Power of Early Childhood Education:  
A vision to support our youngest learners***



*Vision: 100% Student Success  
Mission: Educate and prepare each student for college, career and life.*



## ***The Power of Early Childhood Education***

High-quality early childhood programs have a profound impact on the lifelong learning trajectory of a young child. The power of high-quality early childhood education transforms lives with benefits that can be seen throughout the educational life in both the academic and social-emotional metrics of growth. The benefits are visible in kindergarten through literacy, numeracy and social skill readiness with immediate and long-term effects that include higher test scores, less grade retention, reduced special education services, higher graduation rates and higher four-year college attendance rates, to name a few. In this pioneering, nationally recognized move, the state made the promise of high-quality prekindergarten for all four-year old children across the state of Florida. Since 2005, the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program (VPK) has been in place through a variety of settings: public and private schools, licensed childcare centers, accredited faith-based centers, and family childcare homes.

Guided by the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards, eight early learning and developmental domains<sup>1</sup> for age-appropriate progress are at the heart of this pioneering program with the primary goal being to ensure kindergarten readiness and set our youngest learners on a pathway to educational and lifelong success.

To measure kindergarten readiness, Florida Statute requires each school district to administer the statewide Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) to each student in the school district within the first 30 days of kindergarten. Since 2016, the FLKRS screening instrument (STAR Early Literacy) measures readiness for kindergarten for each student based on the VPK performance standards through an online, computer adaptive assessment. FLKRS data from across the state of Florida demonstrates that students who complete VPK are more prepared for kindergarten than students who do not attend VPK.

Across the state, in the 2017-18 program year, 76% of children eligible for a VPK program participated<sup>2</sup>. Of these students, there was a 62% readiness rate for students who completed<sup>3</sup> a VPK program. But looking at the overall readiness rate across the state, 53% of children were considered 'ready' based on the FLKRS assessment, conversely 47% of children were not kindergarten ready<sup>4</sup>.

**"We must have a real accountability measure for all our school readiness programs. We are highlighting this data to serve as a rallying cry going forward that we will improve our early learning opportunities for students. Our youngest learners deserve nothing else."**

**Richard Corcoran  
Florida Commissioner of Education**

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<sup>1</sup> Domains and corresponding standards reflect the knowledge and skills for success within specified age-related time frames within the following areas: physical development, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific inquiry, social studies, and creative expression through the arts.

<sup>2</sup> Statewide, 76% participation rate means 169,412 children participated in a VPK program. Source: Florida Office of Economic & Demographic Research

<sup>3</sup> VPK students who completed at least 70% of a VPK program. Source: FDOE Office of Early Learning

<sup>4</sup> Readiness is determined by a Star early literacy overall status score of 500 or greater. Source: FDOE Office of Early Learning

## Fulfilling the Promise of Early Childhood Education in Pinellas County

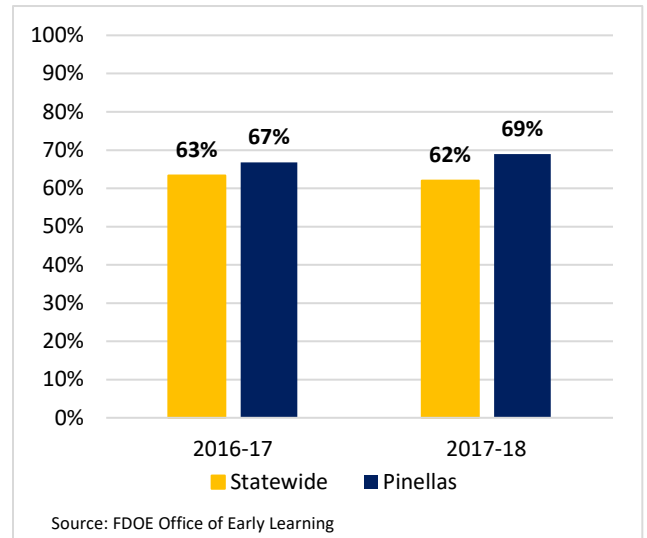
Mirroring the results of the state of Florida, FLKRS data for Pinellas County depicts positive effects for students who complete VPK programs. Students across Pinellas County have outpaced the state in kindergarten readiness over the last two years. Additionally, over the last two program years, across sub-groups, the VPK programs in Pinellas County demonstrate greater success when students complete VPK.

It would be easy to stop there and, as a collective, celebrate the work to not only change the lives of our youngest learners, but also increase long-term economic trajectory for Pinellas County. A 69% readiness rate in Pinellas County<sup>5</sup> may be slightly above the state average, but as a county we **can and must push beyond averages and strive for kindergarten readiness for ALL of our children.**

Our readiness rate is just a top layer analysis and easily masks the low performance of many sub-groups across Pinellas County. These gaps persist and are evident when comparing the percent of students 'ready for kindergarten'. **Gaps are apparent in access to VPK programs and the variability of individual program outcomes within Pinellas County.** Each year, the student results on the FLKRS assessment are correlated back to the provider/program where the student attended VPK.

### Kindergarten Readiness Rates

VPK students who completed at least 70% of a VPK program



### VPK 2018 Participation Rates

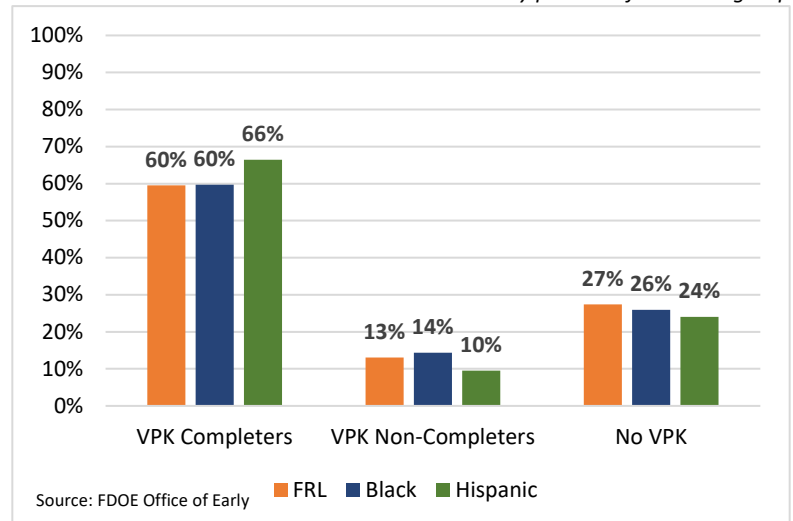
Duval	82.21%
Orange	80.78%
Palm Beach	78.24%
Miami-Dade	76.27%
Pinellas	76.02%
Broward	75.75%
Hillsborough	75.03%

When looking at VPK participation across Pinellas County, 76 percent of students took advantage of programming in the 2017-18 program year which demonstrated less than a percentage point growth over the previous year. Over the last several years the participation rate of Pinellas County has been flat and lags behind some other large districts across Florida.

Our data demonstrates a concentrated need to address access to and completion of VPK programs for the historically underserved populations of Pinellas County. While these data points do not look drastically different for the state of Florida, access to high-quality early education programs provides the foundation for school readiness and must be available to all young children and families living in Pinellas County.

### Pinellas 2018 VPK Participation Rates

by percent of each sub-group



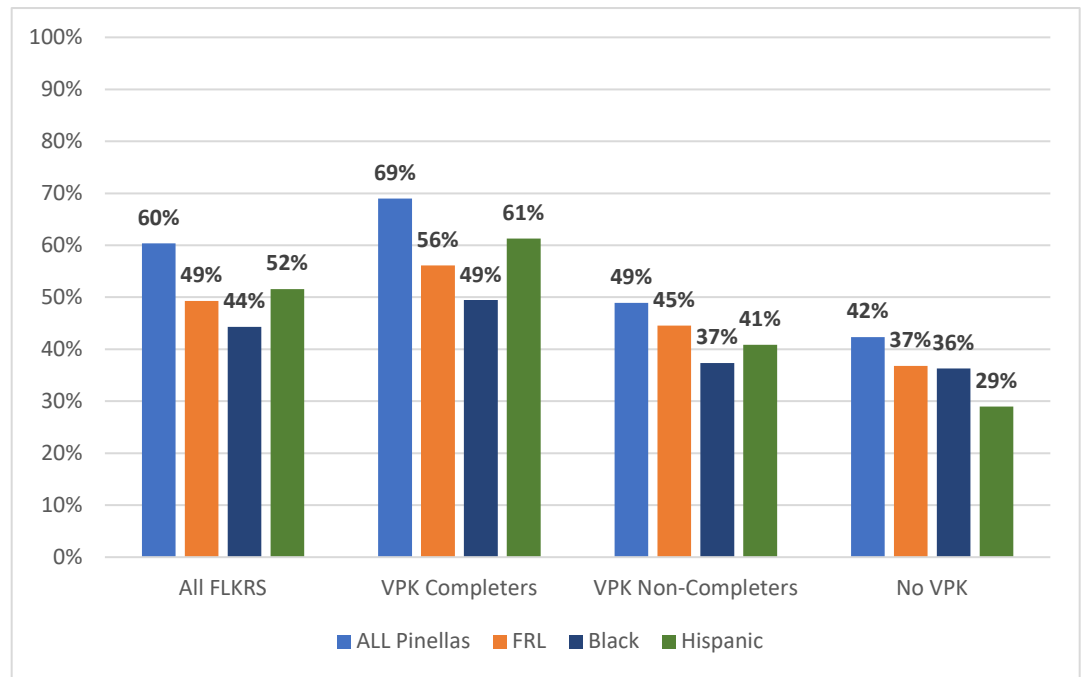
<sup>5</sup> VPK students who completed at least 70% of a VPK program.

## Pinellas 2018 Readiness Rates

By VPK completion and sub-group

Access to and completion of a VPK program is essential across all-subgroups. When our youngest learners engage with our VPK providers the readiness rates increase, with the greatest outcomes seen when students complete at least 70% of a VPK program.

Again, we cannot be satisfied with only 69% of our students who complete a VPK program being ready as they enter kindergarten. These data poignantly demonstrate the need for program quality for underserved populations in Pinellas County.



The learning and experiences provided within VPK programs are the lever for change and measure of the quality of a VPK provider. The benchmark set by the state of Florida for provider effectiveness is currently set at 60, meaning that 60% of the students who attended the provider VPK program for at least 70% of the program must score ready for kindergarten based on FLKRS data<sup>6</sup>.

In spring 2019, the Florida Department of Education released the 2017-18 Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) readiness rates. The need to focus on early childhood education was glaring given that statewide 42 percent of VPK providers had readiness rates below 60. Providers in Pinellas County demonstrate significantly better results as compared to the state and other large districts; however, the fact remains that 28 percent of the providers/programs in Pinellas County are not meeting the state benchmark of 60.

**42%**  
Statewide  
Providers

*"This failure rate is simply not defensible and certainly not good enough for Florida's youngest learners. Nearly three-quarters of Florida parents rely on VPK programs to lay the academic and social foundation necessary for their children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond."*

**Governor Ron DeSantis**

**28%**  
Pinellas  
Providers

*Looking deeply at BOTH the access to and quality of the VPK programs/providers in Pinellas County must be a priority!*

<sup>6</sup> For a FLKRS score to be included in the provider/program readiness rate, a student must have attended at least 70% of the program and have a STAR Early Literacy score. For the 2018-19 program year VPK provider/program rate (using 19-20 FLKRS results), learning gains for students will also be included.



## ***Raising the Bar for Early Childhood Education: A Bold Vision for Pinellas County***

If Pinellas County wants to truly serve the needs of each and every early learner, then it is not enough to be content with incremental success. We must be bold, innovative and work in unison to fulfill the promise of early childhood education in Pinellas County.

If we are serious about raising the bar for our youngest learners, we must be: *audacious* in our goals, *purposeful* in the development of strategies, *committed* to the execution of actions that impact change and *steadfast* in holding ourselves accountable for results.

### **With this in mind, we set forth a courageous vision to guide our collective purpose wherein the next three years we see:**

1. 90 percent of the children from under-served populations in Pinellas County attend a high-quality VPK program as measured by provider readiness rates;
2. 90 percent of the children who attend VPK in Pinellas County are ready for kindergarten;
3. Comprehensive VPK pilot programs in targeted areas which meet and exceed the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) quality benchmarks and student outcomes; and
4. Students who do not enter kindergarten ready receive additional targeted and prioritized literacy supports to ensure 70% grade-level proficiency by third grade.

## ***Increasing Early Childhood Education Outcomes: Our Commitment and Call to Action in Pinellas County***

A vision to fulfill the power and promise of early childhood education across Pinellas County will take the commitment of all partners invested in VPK programs. Vital to this effort will be the development and execution of new, innovative strategies and actions that leverage the strengths and collective drive for change. While not exhaustive, the areas below should be considered to guide the collective work of a comprehensive, strategic plan for coordinated action and change in Pinellas County.

### **Enrollment**

*Provide full day/full year early learning programming for the most vulnerable four-year old learners.* Guarantee a free full day/full year program for families living in targeted zip codes in Pinellas County through the coordination of all available funding sources and secure additional funding sources to fund this guarantee.

*Engage families from the most underserved communities.* Utilize community agencies and partners to inform, recruit and support families. Understanding the importance of early learning and the impact on future success is critical for families to ensure their children participate in programming.

*Assist families in navigating program requirements to reduce barriers.* Coordinate multi-agency, on-demand locations at family-friendly events to educate families on the importance of early learning and provide on-the-spot assistance in completing applications for early learning programs including VPK.



## **Program Quality and Student Outcomes**

*Ensure high-quality instructors and curriculum in every classroom.* Hire instructors with enhanced and specialized training in early childhood. Provide high-quality curriculum, resources and ongoing professional learning and support for VPK classrooms serving students from underserved populations.

*Proactive development and support for program improvement.* It is not enough to wait until a program is deemed unsuccessful or in need of support. Establish a professional learning system of support for teachers, instructors, center directors, school leaders, coaches, district staff and early learning coalitions on the science of reading.

*Provide support to children not meeting the standards at the end of the VPK year.* Create innovative summer programming opportunities for VPK students who need additional time to meet the standards prior to kindergarten entry.

## **Pilot for Success**

*Develop a pilot program that meets all ten of NIEER's quality benchmarks<sup>7</sup>.* By focusing on the inputs of quality program benchmarks set forth by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and through ongoing support, implementation and monitoring key learnings and targeted support and prioritization for student outcomes will be realized. Developing a pilot program in targeted neighborhoods, that meets and exceeds the benchmarks set forth by NIEER will allow for best- and evidence-based practices to be identified, studied and replicated across Pinellas County.

## **Continuing Success**

*Provide dedicated support to children who do not enter kindergarten ready.* Invest in additional cohesive and comprehensive literacy supports for students throughout grades K-2 to ensure they are on grade-level by third grade.

## ***Realizing Our Promise for Early Childhood Education: Accountability for our Youngest Learners***

To truly make an exponential impact, it will take a full continuum of support and accountability for results. Together, we must be clear and responsible not only for aggregate improvement, but that each and every young learner in Pinellas County has a high-quality VPK experience. Hard decisions will need to be made as we hold each provider accountable for program quality and, most importantly, student outcomes.

We must examine our current practices which allow providers to be 'on probation' for numerous years. This will mean, program assessment cycles using a system such as Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The administration of the cycles for program planning, observation, feedback, and follow-up coaching must be done within one full program year with demonstrated results. And while we work diligently and collaboratively on strategies that will exponentially impact the trajectory of our children, we must also commit to the incremental, daily actions and change that can produce dramatic results. Our youngest learners do not have time for us to take years to transform their environments.

Pinellas County can be the leader for both the state and nation. We can fulfill the power and promise of early childhood education for all our learners. We must do it together. We must all commit to the vision and collective action it will take.

If you want to go fast, go alone.

If you want to go far,

**GO TOGETHER.**

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<sup>7</sup> NIEER ten quality program benchmarks: Early Learning and Developmental Standards, Curriculum Supports, Teacher Degree, Teacher Specialized Training, Assistant Teacher Degree, Staff Professional Development, Class Size, Staff-Child Ratio, Screenings and Referrals, and Continuous Quality Improvement System.

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