

Early Learning Tumult ... Again?

The 2012 Legislative Session will be remembered by early learning advocates as one of the most difficult, contentious sessions in history. Fortunately, it appears the experience may have finally taught us what we try to teach our pre-schoolers: Be nice and to play together.

Following the 2012 debacle, the Partnership for Florida's Children and the Early Learning Advocacy Group were created to engage representatives of all early learning groups in the same sandbox. At this point, it has worked fantastically, and Florida's children might benefit enormously if we can navigate the inevitable treacherous waters that will churn during session.

Members of the two collaboratives have tentatively signed-off on working together to:

- seek increased funding for the School Readiness (SR) Program;
- ensure local flexibility to serve school age children to age 12 with SR funds;
- maintain the current SR governance structure; and
- require and resource pre- and post assessments of SR children.

Your next *Legislative Link* will expand upon these positions.

The main question at this point is, "When will we see an early learning bill, and what will it look like?" It appears the House will take the lead on early learning issues, with Education Committee Chair Marlene O'Toole bringing a fresh, energetic approach. One of her first charges was to have each of the 18 Education Committee members visit with an Early Learning Coalition (ELC) Executive Director and Board member, and with the executive director of a program funded by that ELC. O'Toole mapped out the visits to ensure Legislators met with "new faces" outside of their own communities. On Thursday, the Committee met in a workshop during which members recounted their visits and the insights they had gleaned from them. Consistent themes revolved around the need in every area to address quality and waiting lists, maintain local flexibility and ensure provider accountability, and frustration with delays implementing the Early Learning Information System (ELIS).

Meanwhile, Chair O'Toole has made it clear that her four main issues will be to address SR accountability, transparency, governance, and funding (the latter in partnership with the Education Appropriations Subcommittee). One of the main outcomes she seeks is to ensure the early learning system can account for how every taxpayer dollar is spent, and that each dollar is spent appropriately.

Among many issues not yet clarified is the definition of "appropriately"; a definition grounded in the fundamental issue of where to draw the line between slots vs. quality (i.e., do we use our limited resources to fund more slots and less quality, or fewer slots and more quality?). The perfect line is a fine one, achieved by funding the most slots with the highest quality. It is an elusive line; the one around which almost all early learning issues and controversy revolve.

The United Way position on quality vs. slots is complex, but simple: Simply put, if taxpayers are paying for a school readiness program, the children should be ready for school when they enter. "Ready" means prepared to succeed. "Prepared to succeed" means cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. Simple!!?

As legislation is crafted in coming days, and differing perspectives clash and work to reconcile, perhaps the most interesting thing to watch will be the extent to which legislators accept the counsel of the Florida Partnership for Children and the Early Learning Advocacy Group. They are the largest collaboratives of early learning advocates and experts ever assembled, representing virtually every sector of the industry: United Ways, Children's Services Councils, the Children's Movement, Early Learning Coalitions, and organizations representing thousands of for-profit, non-profit, and faith-based providers.