



OPINION: Early Childhood Education: Preparing Today's Children for the Future

In the fall of 2016, over 15,500 new kindergarten students enrolled in public schools throughout Hillsborough County. During the first 30 days of the school year, a basic readiness assessment completed on the kindergarten students found that only about *one-half* of the students were ready to read. Sadly, across the state a similar situation exists, our young children arrive at kindergarten already behind. When looking at subgroups of these students, less than half of minority children, English language learners, or low income students were ready to read. Experience tells us that children who arrive at kindergarten less prepared are likely to lag behind their peers throughout their entire educational years – they are more likely to be below grade level at third grade; are more likely to be retained; and less likely to graduate on time from high school or graduate at all. Senator Dana Young (Tampa District 18) said, “We need to make sure these programs are adequately funded so that every child that wants to participate is able to do so.”

Children are born ready to learn. Scientists have documented that brain growth of young children is astounding from infancy through preschool. John Heckman, a Noble Laureate and professor of economics at the University of Chicago has demonstrated that investments in early childhood education outperform the stock market every year! "The benefits of making investments into early education and VPK are undeniable. The lasting and lifelong positive impacts these programs have are proven study after study, particularly when it comes to disadvantaged students. Early education is one of the many tools we should look to use to help improve Florida's education system and create better educational outcomes for our parents and students," said Rep. Jackie Toledo, House District 60. This same sentiment was noted by Rep. Ben Diamond (District 68), “High-quality early childhood education programs do more to improve students’ performance throughout their academic careers than any other single education reform. Studies show that for every dollar spent on early learning, between four and nine dollars are saved. Unfortunately, per-student funding for VPK has remained stagnant for the last three years, and it is currently \$2,000 dollars less than the national average. Furthermore, Florida meets fewer quality benchmarks than nearly any other state. In order for our kids to have the skills they need to succeed, we must make early learning a top priority.”

Polls by bipartisan groups show overwhelming support for increased access to high-quality affordable early education for all children. Voters have signaled to their local, state, and federal delegates that expanding early learning options for families is a priority and a necessity for our communities and nation. Voters in Florida approved the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program in 2002 and programs were implemented in 2005. VPK is open to all Florida’s children before they begin kindergarten as a preparation tool. Unfortunately, VPK’s success has not reached its potential due to underfunding. “It is critical for Florida’s leaders to embrace and support funding for all children to receive quality early



learning experiences. I applaud the many leaders across the state who are championing this critical need for all of our children and families,” added Dr. Steve Knobl, CEO of Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County.

Senator Dana Young has championed this effort in the Florida Senate. Her passionate leadership and support for a proposed \$16.6 million increase for the VPK funding in a challenging budget year. Aakash Patel, Chairman of the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County concluded, “There are few issues that enjoy bipartisan support like the issue of early learning. Voters want elected officials to do more to create a stronger Florida, a stronger America, both now and for the future. I am proud Governor Scott and the Legislature have taken a stand to support increased funding for our children.”

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Dr. Steve Knobl is the CEO of the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County (ELCHC). The ELCHC is a \$72 million dollar, Hillsborough, non-profit that serves approximately 20,000 children per day via its early childhood programs and services.

Aakash Patel, is the Board Chair for the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County and Founder/CEO of Elevate, Inc. in Tampa, Florida.