



### **What is the School Readiness Program?**

Established in 1999,<sup>1</sup> the School Readiness Program provides subsidies for early childhood education and child care services to children of low-income families; children in protective services who are at risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment; and children with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> The School Readiness Program is a state-federal partnership between Florida's Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) and the Office of Child Care of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>3</sup>

The School Readiness Program receives funding from a mixture of state and federal sources, including the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant, the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, and general revenue and other state funds.<sup>4</sup>

The program is administered by early learning coalitions (ELC) at the county or regional level.<sup>5</sup> AWI administers the program at the state level, including statewide coordination of the ELCs.<sup>6</sup>

### **Who is eligible for the School Readiness Program?**

The federal regulations governing the CCDF block grant,<sup>7</sup> the primary funding source for the School Readiness Program, authorize states to use the funds for child care services, if:

- ❖ The child is under 13 years of age or, at the state's option, under age 19 and physically or mentally incapable of caring for himself or herself or under court supervision;
- ❖ The child's family income does not exceed 85 percent of the state's median income for a family of the same size; and
- ❖ The child:
  - ◆ Resides with a parent or parents who work or attend job training or educational programs; or
  - ◆ Receives, or needs to receive, protective services.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See s. 1, ch. 99-357, L.O.F.

<sup>2</sup> Section 411.01(6), F.S.

<sup>3</sup> See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Care and Development Fund Fact Sheet*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/ccdf/factsheet.htm> (last visited Oct. 15, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Specific Appropriation 2243, s. 6, ch. 2010-152, L.O.F.

<sup>5</sup> Section 411.01(5), F.S.

<sup>6</sup> Section 411.01(4)(a), F.S.

<sup>7</sup> 45 C.F.R. parts 98 and 99.

<sup>8</sup> 45 C.F.R. s. 98.20(a). Florida's CCDF state plan for FY 2010-2011 allows CCDF-funded child care for children above age 13, but below age 19 who are physically, mentally incapable of self-care, or both. The CCDF Plan defines physical or mental capacity as a developmental delay or established physical or mental condition or mild or moderate emotional problems as certified by a licensed psychiatrist, psychologist, or licensed mental health professional. The CCDF Plan does not allow CCDF-funded child care for children in the same age groups who are

Within these broad federal eligibility categories, Florida law specifies that the School Readiness Program is established for children from birth to school entry.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, ELCs must admit children into the School Readiness Program according to the following priorities:

- ❖ **First priority.** Children from families in which an adult is receiving temporary cash assistance and subject to federal work requirements.<sup>10</sup>
- ❖ **Second priority.** Children who are eligible for a school readiness program but who have not yet entered school, who are served by child protective services, and for whom child care is needed to minimize the risk of further abuse, neglect, or abandonment.<sup>11</sup>
- ❖ **Third priority.** Children who meet one or more of the following criteria:
  - ◆ A child under the age of kindergarten eligibility who is:
    - At risk of welfare dependency, including an economically disadvantaged<sup>12</sup> child, a child of a participant in the welfare transition program,<sup>13</sup> a child of a migratory agricultural worker, or a child of a teen parent.
    - A child of a working family that is economically disadvantaged.
    - A child for whom financial assistance is provided through the Relative Caregiver Program.<sup>14</sup>
  - ◆ A three year-old or four year-old child who:
    - Has a disability;
    - Has been served in a specific part-time exceptional student education program or a combination of part-time exceptional education programs with required special services, aids, or equipment; and
    - Who was previously reported for funding part time under the Florida Education Finance Program as an exceptional student.<sup>15</sup>

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under court supervision. Agency for Workforce Innovation, *Child Care and Development Fund Plan, FY 2010-2011*, at 41 and 104, available at <http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/documents/CCDF%20Final%2009-10-09.doc> [hereinafter *CCDF State Plan*]; see also rule 60BB-4.200(1), F.A.C.

<sup>9</sup> Section 411.01(6), F.S.

<sup>10</sup> Section 411.01(6), F.S. Federal law provides mandatory work requirements for recipients of assistance under a state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Block Grant. 42 U.S.C. s. 607. These work requirements establish that a state must meet or exceed minimum rates of recipients participating in "work activities" (e.g., employment, education, and vocational training). 42 U.S.C. s. 607(d); see s. 445.024, F.S.

<sup>11</sup> Section 411.01(6)(b), F.S.; see also chs. 39 and 409, F.S.

<sup>12</sup> "Economically disadvantaged" means having a family income that does not exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty level. Section 411.01(6), F.S. (flush-left provisions at the end of the subsection). Annually, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services establishes the poverty guidelines. For the remainder of 2010, the federal poverty level for a family of four persons is \$22,050. Thus, 150 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of four is \$33,075. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *The HHS Poverty Guidelines for the Remainder of 2010*, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/10poverty.shtml> (last visited Oct. 11, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> The goal of Florida's Welfare Transition Program is to emphasize work, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility. To accomplish this goal, the structure of the program includes child care assistance. Agency for Workforce Innovation, AWI Programs, *Welfare Transition Program*, available at [http://www.floridajobs.org/workforce/wel\\_trans.html](http://www.floridajobs.org/workforce/wel_trans.html) (last visited Sept. 24, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Section 411.01(6)(c), F.S.; see also s. 39.5085, F.S.

<sup>15</sup> Section 411.01(6)(c)2., F.S.

- ◆ An economically disadvantaged child, child with a disability, or child at-risk of future school failure, from birth to 4 years of age, who is served at home through a home visitor program or an intensive parent education program.<sup>16</sup>
- ◆ A child who meets federal and state eligibility requirements for the migrant preschool program, but is not economically disadvantaged.<sup>17</sup>

**Transitional child care.** Through the School Readiness Program, ELCs fund transitional child care for former participants of the Welfare Transition Program and individuals who are provided assistance through “up-front diversion.”<sup>18</sup> Transitional child care is available for up to 2 years:

- ❖ For a former participant of the welfare transition program who is no longer receiving temporary cash assistance, is employed or actively seeking employment, and whose income does not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level at any time during the 2 year period.
- ❖ For an individual redirected through up-front diversion and who is employed or is actively seeking employment and whose income does not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level at any time during the 2 year period.<sup>19</sup>

**Child Care Executive Partnership.** The Child Care Executive Partnership (CCEP) Program allows funding from the School Readiness Program to be used for payment of matching child care funding for low-income working parents who are eligible for subsidized child care.<sup>20</sup> State and federal funds are used as incentives for generating matching local funds from local governments, employers, charitable foundations, and other sources.<sup>21</sup> During FY 2008-09, 239 private businesses, 42 non-profit agencies, and 20 government entities participated in the CCEP Program.<sup>22</sup>

### **What responsibilities does the Agency for Workforce Innovation have regarding the School Readiness Program?**

AWI is Florida’s lead agency for administering the federal CCDF from which funds are used to implement the School Readiness Program.<sup>23</sup> Florida law directs AWI to establish a unified approach to the state’s school readiness efforts by adopting specific system support services for the state’s school readiness programs.<sup>24</sup> System support services include:

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<sup>16</sup> Section 411.01(6)(c)3., F.S.

<sup>17</sup> Section 411.01(6)(c)4., F.S.

<sup>18</sup> Section 445.032, F.S. “Up-front diversion” is immediate assistance provided by the state’s workforce system to those customers who may not need ongoing temporary cash assistance, but, due to an unexpected circumstance or emergency situation, require assistance to secure or retain employment or child support. Section 445.017, F.S.

<sup>19</sup> Section 445.032, F.S.

<sup>20</sup> Section 411.0102, F.S.; see 411.01(2)(c), F.S. The CCEP program is available for a child whose family income does not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Specific Appropriation 2243, s. 6, ch. 2010-152, L.O.F.; see *supra* note 12 (federal poverty level).

<sup>21</sup> Section 411.0102(3), F.S.

<sup>22</sup> Agency for Workforce Innovation, *Office of Early Learning Annual Report 2008-2009*, at 5 (2009), available at [http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/documents/OEL\\_08-09\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/documents/OEL_08-09_Annual_Report.pdf) [hereinafter *Early Learning Annual Report*].

<sup>23</sup> Section 411.01(4)(c), F.S. The law directs the Governor to designate AWI as the lead agency for administering the CCDF. *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> Section 411.01(4)(d)3., F.S.

- ❖ Child care resource and referral services.
- ❖ Warm-Line services.<sup>25</sup>
- ❖ Eligibility determinations.
- ❖ Child performance standards.
- ❖ Child screening and assessment.
- ❖ Developmentally appropriate curricula.
- ❖ Health and safety requirements.
- ❖ Statewide data system requirements.
- ❖ Rating and improvement systems.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, AWI must develop and adopt performance standards and outcome measures for school readiness programs. Child performance standards must describe age-appropriate expectations for what a child in the School Readiness Program should know and be able to do. The standards for children from birth to age five must be integrated with the performance standards adopted by the Department of Education (DOE) for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education (VPK) Program.<sup>27</sup> ELC administered programs must be aligned to these performance standards.<sup>28</sup>

AWI coordinates the ELCs at the state level.<sup>29</sup> AWI must approve ELC school readiness plans, review the plans every two years, and monitor plan implementation.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, AWI must provide technical assistance and training to ELCs and monitor and evaluate their administration of the School Readiness and VPK Programs.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> AWI is required to contract with the “statewide resource information and referral agency” to establish a statewide toll-free Warm-line for the purpose of assisting child care providers in serving children with disabilities and special needs. Section 402.3018, F.S.

<sup>26</sup> Section 411.01(4)(d)3.a.-i., F.S.

<sup>27</sup> Section 411.01(4)(d)8., F.S.; *see also* Agency for Workforce Innovation, *Birth to Five Performance Standards*, <http://www.flbt5.com/selection.aspx> (last visited Oct. 11, 2010). The performance standards must address the following school readiness skills: compliance with rules, limitations, and routines; ability to perform tasks; interactions with adults; interactions with peers; ability to cope with challenges; self-help skills; ability to express the child’s needs; verbal communication skills; problem-solving skills; following of verbal directions; demonstration of curiosity, persistence, and exploratory behavior; interest in books and other printed materials; paying attention to stories; participation in art and music activities; and ability to identify colors, geometric shapes, letters of the alphabet, numbers, and spatial and temporal relationships. Section 411.01(4)(j), F.S.

<sup>28</sup> Section 411.01(5)(c)1.a., F.S.

<sup>29</sup> Section 411.01(4)(a), F.S.

<sup>30</sup> Section 411.01(4)(d)2., F.S. AWI is required to adopt rules establishing criteria for approving school readiness plans. Section 411.01(4)(d)4., F.S.

<sup>31</sup> Section 411.01(4)(d)6., (l), and (n) F.S.; *see ss.* 1002.55(1) and 1002.61(1)(b), F.S. (VPK Program). AWI, DOE, and the ELCs must coordinate with the Department of Children and Family Services to minimize duplicating interagency activities, health and safety monitoring, and acquiring and composing data pertaining to child care training and credentialing. Section 411.01(4)(d)7., F.S.

## **What responsibilities do early learning coalitions have regarding the School Readiness Program?**

Each ELC administers the School Readiness Program,<sup>32</sup> the VPK Program,<sup>33</sup> and the state's child care resource and referral network in its county or multi-county region.<sup>34</sup> There are currently 31 ELCs.<sup>35</sup> Each ELC is governed by a board of directors comprised of various stakeholders and community representatives. Three board members, including the chair, are appointed by the Governor.<sup>36</sup>

Each ELC must serve a minimum of 2,000 children based upon the monthly average number of children served by the coalition's school readiness program during the previous 12 months.<sup>37</sup> If the number of children served by an ELC falls below this level, it must merge with another ELC to form a multicounty coalition.<sup>38</sup> AWI must waive this merger requirement if certain criteria are met.<sup>39</sup>

In order to participate in the School Readiness Program, each ELC must submit a school readiness plan to AWI for approval.<sup>40</sup> The plan must demonstrate how ELC-offered programs will be aligned to statutory requirements, performance standards, and outcome measures. The plan must address how instruction will enable children birth through five years of age to meet the performance standards.<sup>41</sup> AWI must adopt rules establishing school readiness plan approval criteria which, among other things, must include:

- ❖ A community plan that addresses the needs of eligible children and providers within the coalition's county or multicounty region.
- ❖ A sliding fee scale establishing a copayment for parents based upon their ability to pay, which is the same for all program providers.<sup>42</sup>
- ❖ A choice of settings and locations in licensed, registered, religious-exempt, or school-based programs to be provided to parents.

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<sup>32</sup> Section 411.01(5), F.S.

<sup>33</sup> Section 1002.55(1) and 1002.61(1)(b), F.S.

<sup>34</sup> Section 411.0101, F.S.

<sup>35</sup> Agency for Workforce Innovation, *Early Learning Coalition Directory*, <http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/CoalitionDirectory2.htm> (last visited Oct. 11, 2010). Florida law permits the establishment of 31 or fewer ELCs. Section 411.01(5)(a)2.a., F.S.

<sup>36</sup> Section 411.01(5)(a)4.-6., F.S.

<sup>37</sup> Section 411.01(5)(a)2.b., F.S.

<sup>38</sup> Section 411.01(5)(a)3., F.S. AWI must adopt procedures for merging ELCs. *Id.*

<sup>39</sup>Section 411.01(5)(a)3.a.-c., F.S. AWI must waive the merger requirement if it determines that the ELC has substantially implemented its school readiness plan; the ELC demonstrates to AWI its ability to effectively and efficiently implement the VPK Program; and the ELC demonstrates to AWI its ability to perform its duties in accordance with the law. *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> Section 411.01(5)(d)1., F.S.

<sup>41</sup> Section 411.01(5)(d)2.a.-b., F.S.

<sup>42</sup> Each ELC is required to adopt, subject to approval by AWI, a local sliding fee scale for the School Readiness Program. Section 411.01(5)(d)4.b., F.S.; rule 60BB-4.400(1), F.A.C. This fee scale establishes a co-payment charged to a parent based on the parent's income and family size. Rule 60BB-4.400(1), F.A.C. A provider receives payment for school readiness services from the ELC and is responsible for collecting the co-payment directly from the parent. Rule 60BB-4.401, F.A.C. A school readiness provider is not prohibited from charging parent fees beyond the co-payment. See rule 60BB-4.400, F.A.C.

- ❖ Child eligibility priorities.
- ❖ Performance standards and outcome measures adopted by AWI.
- ❖ Payment rates adopted by the ELCs and approved by AWI.
- ❖ Direct enhancement services for families and children.<sup>43</sup>
- ❖ The business organization of the ELC.
- ❖ The implementation of locally developed quality programs in accordance with the requirements adopted by AWI regarding the expenditure of funds for improving the quality of child care.<sup>44</sup>

An ELC with an approved school readiness plan must implement a comprehensive system of school readiness services which enhance children's attainment of AWI-adopted performance standards and outcome measures.<sup>45</sup> School readiness programs within each ELC's service area must include, among other things, use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, age appropriate developmental assessment, and a pretest and post-test administered to children as they enter and leave the program; character development education; appropriate staff to child ratios; a healthy and safe learning environment; and a parental resource and referral network.<sup>46</sup>

### ***What early childhood education and child care services are provided through the School Readiness Program?***

The School Readiness Program provides subsidies for a wide range of child care services. Among other things, subsidies may be provided to assist low-income parents achieve financial self-sufficiency or to serve children with disabilities.<sup>47</sup> Available services include extended-day, extended-year, and school-age child care and may be provided in conjunction with other programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, the VPK program, and school district programs for prekindergarten children with disabilities.<sup>48</sup> Each child who enrolls in the program is developmentally screened. If screening reveals a health or educational issue, the child is referred to a specialist to determine appropriate services.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Direct enhancement services for families may include parent training and involvement activities and strategies to meet the needs of unique populations and local eligibility priorities. Enhancement services for children may include provider supports and professional development approved in the plan by AWI. Section 411.01(5)(d)4.g., F.S.

<sup>44</sup> Section 411.01(5)(d)4.a.-i., F.S.

<sup>45</sup> Section 411.01(5)(c)1.a. and (d)2., F.S.

<sup>46</sup> Section 411.01(5)(c)2., F.S.; *see infra* notes 55-60 (child care resource and referral network).

<sup>47</sup> Section 411.01 (6), F.S.; Agency for Workforce Innovation, *A Family Guide for Selecting Quality Early Learning Programs*, at 10 (June 2009), available at [http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/documents/ALL\\_FamilyGuide.pdf](http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/documents/ALL_FamilyGuide.pdf) [hereinafter *Early Learning Guide*]; *see also* Agency for Workforce Innovation, *Parent Resources*, <http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/parentresources.html#moreinfo> (last visited Oct. 14, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Section 411.01(2)(b)-(c), F.S.; s. 411.0101(3)(a), F.S.; *Early Learning Guide*, *supra* note 47, at 10.

<sup>49</sup> Section 411.01(2)(a), F.S.; *Early Learning Guide*, *supra* note 47, at 10.

### **Which child care providers may participate in school readiness programs?**

Florida law requires each ELC to include a “choice of settings and locations in licensed, registered, religious-exempt, or school-based programs.”<sup>50</sup> A wide range of public and private providers of early childhood education and child care services participate in the School Readiness Program, including:

- ❖ Public and private schools;
- ❖ Licensed child care facilities and large family child care homes;
- ❖ Licensed and registered family day care homes;
- ❖ Faith-based child care facilities and after-school programs, which are both exempt from licensure; and
- ❖ Informal providers<sup>51</sup> (e.g., in-home and relative care).<sup>52</sup>

Child care providers who provide school readiness services are regulated by the Department of Children and Families (DCF).<sup>53</sup> In FY 2009-10, a total of 11,596 child care providers participated in the School Readiness Program, including 877 public schools; 38 private schools; 5,856 licensed child care facilities; 229 large family child care homes; 3,191 family day care homes; 866 licensed-exempt providers; and 539 informal providers. Of these providers, 844 were faith-based.<sup>54</sup>

### **What is the Child Care Resource and Referral Network?**

AWI must establish a statewide child care resource and referral network to assist consumers in identifying available public and private child care providers.<sup>55</sup> Each ELC must compile profiles of available public and private child care providers within the ELC’s service area for use by parents in choosing providers. Various types of child care programs and services must be included in the network.<sup>56</sup> Referrals must be made to all “legally operating” child care facilities.<sup>57</sup> The child care resource and referral network is also used to document requests for

<sup>50</sup> Section 411.01(5)(d)4.c., F.S.

<sup>51</sup> *CCDF State Plan*, *supra* note 8, at 105.

<sup>52</sup> See s. 411.01(5)(d)4.c., F.S.; *CCDF State Plan*, *supra* note 8, at 35. Federal regulations governing the CCDF block grant, in effect, require the School Readiness Program to serve children in center-based child care, group home child care, family child care, and in-home child care. 45 C.F.R. s. 98.30(e)(1).

<sup>53</sup> Chapter 402, F.S.

<sup>54</sup> Email, Agency for Workforce Innovation, Chief of Staff (Oct. 15, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Section 411.0101(1), F.S.; see also Agency for Workforce Innovation, *State Child Care Resource and Referral Network*, <http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/ChildCareResourceReferralNetwork.html> (last visited Oct. 14, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> Section 411.0101(3)(a), F.S. These services may include family day care, public and private child care programs, the VPK Program, Head Start, the school readiness program, special education programs for prekindergarten children with disabilities, services for children with developmental disabilities, full-time and part-time programs, before-school and after-school programs, vacation care programs, parent education, the Temporary Cash Assistance Program, and related family support services. *Id.*; see also Agency for Workforce Innovation, *Child Care Resource and Referral Reference Guide*, at 19, 23-25 (June 2010), available at <http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning/Projects/CCRR-NewReferenceGuide-6-23-10.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Section 411.0101(3)(b), F.S.

services and provide technical assistance to providers regarding initiating or expanding services and program and budget development.<sup>58</sup>

An ELC may contract for or provide these services directly.<sup>59</sup> In FY 2008-09, 17 ELCs operated child care resource and referral services in-house and the remaining 14 ELCs contracted for services.<sup>60</sup>

### **How do parents enroll their children in the School Readiness Program?**

A parent may apply for his or her child's admission in the School Readiness Program by submitting an application to an ELC. AWI has established, and ELCs must use, a single point of entry that enables a parent to enroll his or her child in the school readiness program at various locations throughout a county, by telephone, or through an Internet website.<sup>61</sup>

Each ELC must give parents a choice of settings and locations in licensed, registered, religious-exempt, or school-based programs.<sup>62</sup> Parental choice is provided through the issuance of a payment certificate.<sup>63</sup> Upon selecting an eligible provider, a parent may use the payment certificate to enroll the child in the School Readiness Program.<sup>64</sup> If an ELC is not able to enroll an eligible child when the application is submitted (*e.g.*, space or funding limitations), the coalition must place the child's name on a "unified waiting list," which tracks eligible children waiting for enrollment.<sup>65</sup>

### **What funding is available for the School Readiness Program?**

The School Readiness Program receives funding from a mixture of state and federal sources, including the federal Child Care and Development Fund block grant, the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant, and general revenue and other state funds.<sup>66</sup>

For FY 2010-11, a total of \$615.4 million was appropriated for the School Readiness Program from state and federal funds, including \$353.6 million from the CCDF block grant, \$116.4 million from the TANF block grant, \$136 million from the state's General Revenue Fund, \$9 million from other state fund sources, and \$500,000 from other federal fund sources.<sup>67</sup> As part of the other state and federal funding sources, AWI was provided \$11 million for the continued development of a computerized data system known as the Early Learning Information System (ELIS).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Section 411.01(3)(d), F.S.

<sup>59</sup> Section 411.0101(2), F.S.

<sup>60</sup> Email, Agency for Workforce Innovation, Chief of Staff (Oct. 15, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Section 411.01(5)(c)1.e, F.S.

<sup>62</sup> Section 411.01(5)(d)4.c. and (7)(a), F.S.; 45 C.F.R. s. 98.30.

<sup>63</sup> Section 411.01(7)(b), F.S.

<sup>64</sup> 45 C.F.R. ss. 98.30 and 98.2.; s. 411.01(7)(b), F.S. Federal regulations implementing the CCDF block grant refer to this payment method as a "child care certificate." 45 C.F.R. ss. 98.30 and 98.2.

<sup>65</sup> Section 411.01(5)(c)1.e, F.S.; *see* rule 60BB-4.300, F.A.C.

<sup>66</sup> Specific Appropriation 2243, s. 6, ch. 2010-152, L.O.F.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

<sup>68</sup> Specific Appropriation 2248, s. 6, ch. 2010-152, L.O.F.

***Where can I get additional information?***

***Agency for Workforce Innovation***

Office of Early Learning

(850) 921-3180

<http://www.floridajobs.org/earlylearning>

***Florida House of Representatives***

Education Committee

(850) 488-7451

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov>

***Florida House of Representatives***

Appropriations Committee

(850) 488-6204

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov>