

Florida

Background

Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK)

VPK is a half-day¹ pre-K program open to all Florida four-year-olds. Public schools, licensed child care centers, accredited nonpublic schools, accredited faith-based centers, and licensed family child care homes are eligible VPK providers. Charter schools can also offer VPK. The majority of children enrolled in VPK attend programs in nonpublic settings, however, including community-based preschools, child care centers, and private schools.

The Office of Early Learning (OEL) in the Florida Department of Education administers VPK at the state level. Regional early learning coalitions (ELCs) manage the program locally.

Charter schools in Florida

Florida allows new and conversion charter schools. Local school boards are the primary authorizers. State universities and community colleges may authorize charter schools under limited circumstances.

Process for Accessing Pre-K Funds

The Office of Early Learning distributes VPK funding to regional early learning councils (ELCs). Public and private providers interested in offering VPK submit funding application materials to their ELC. Public providers are public school districts. Private providers include private schools, community-based providers, and child care centers. Charter schools can offer VPK as a public or a private provider.

If a charter school is authorized in its charter to offer pre-K, then it is a public provider and can only access VPK funding through its school district. The district school board determines which district schools, including charters, will provide VPK.

If the school's charter does not include pre-K, then it applies to the ELC as a private provider. Charter schools that are private providers must adhere to additional guidelines, such as meeting the child care facility licensing requirements.

When applying to offer VPK, all potential new providers must submit information on setting, licensure, accreditation, director and instructor credentials, and class calendars. Existing providers seeking funding renewal must resubmit these application materials annually.



TOTAL SCORE

33/50


Florida's climate for charter schools to offer pre-K is **somewhat hospitable**

- + There are no state statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K.
- Compared to K-12 funding levels, low pre-K program funding makes offering pre-K less attractive to charters.
- + The size of the pre-K program does not limit charter access to funding.
- The funding, application, or approval process creates a barrier to charter access.
- + Automatic enrollment from charter pre-K to kindergarten is not prohibited in legislation or practice.




Barriers


Are there any statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K?

 **No.** The VPK legislation does not explicitly list charter schools as eligible providers and charter law does not explicitly allow charter schools to offer pre-K. Provider application materials from the Office of Early Learning, however, list charter schools as eligible providers. Out of 331 elementary charter schools in Florida, more than one hundred offer pre-K.


Is the per-pupil funding of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

 **Yes.** Low pre-K program funding makes pre-K less attractive to charters. VPK per-pupil funding is low, even for a half-day program. Charter schools offering VPK receive less than 33 percent of the per-pupil funding they receive to serve K-12 students.


Is the size of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

 **No.** The size of the pre-K program does not limit charter access to state pre-K funding. VPK serves nearly 80 percent of the four-year-olds in the state.

Is the application, approval, and/or funding process a barrier to charter access?

 **Yes.** The approval and funding processes are barriers to charter access to state pre-K funding. Charter schools whose charter agreements include pre-K can only go through their school district to access VPK funds. This makes sense because most charter schools are authorized by local districts—making the district responsible for both authorizing the charter school to serve pre-K and allocating funds for it to do so. But while some districts are eager to work with charter schools to provide VPK, others are hesitant to take on the additional oversight responsibilities. Charter schools that are not permitted by their authorizing school district to add pre-K to their charter must meet state child care facility license requirements to offer VPK.

Is automatic enrollment from pre-K to kindergarten prohibited in legislation or practice?

 **No.** Florida state law allows charter schools to grant enrollment preference to students who complete a pre-kindergarten program “associated with the school.” This

includes programs that share common facilities or have established formal or informal partnerships.

The legislated enrollment preference does not, however, guarantee that charter schools can directly enroll their pre-K students into their kindergarten program. The school’s charter contract must explicitly allow the school to grant enrollment preference to pre-K students; otherwise, the state interprets the contract as prohibiting that preference. During the contracting process, the state intentionally prohibits any charter school that receives federal Charter School Program funding from giving pre-K students enrollment preference in its charter.

Recommendations

Florida charter schools have been relatively successful in accessing state pre-K funds, but several barriers, as described above, remain. To address them, Florida should:

- Increase the funding level for VPK to cover the costs of delivering a program that meets state requirements.
- Revise the VPK application process to allow charter schools to apply for VPK directly through their ELC.
- Increase funding to authorizers to build their capacity to oversee charter pre-K programs.



	Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK)	Charter schools in Florida
Year created	Launched in 2005 ²	Charter law enacted in 1996 ³
Children in state	441,565 three- and four-year-olds in Florida ⁴	3,354,489 school-age children in Florida ⁵
Children served	175,145 children served 0 percent of three-year-olds 78 percent of four-year-olds ⁶	239,996 students served 7.2 percent of school-age population 625 charter schools ⁷
Charters offering pre-K	102 charter schools in Florida offer pre-K. ⁸	331 charter schools in Florida offer elementary programs. ⁹
Funding	Providers receive \$2,383 per pupil to offer VPK during the school year. ¹⁰	Charter schools receive \$8,407 per pupil to serve K–12 students. ¹¹

Endnotes

1 Program requires 540 program hours for school-year VPK and 300 program hours for summer VPK.

2 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013: State Preschool Yearbook” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf>.

3 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “Measuring Up: Florida,” <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/FL>.

4 State population data calculated using ACS 2012 five-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey,” www.census.gov/acs.

5 Ibid., all children in households, three to seventeen years old.

6 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013.”

7 NACPS, “Measuring Up: Florida.”

8 Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, search page, <http://floridacharterschools.org/schools/find/>.

9 Ibid.

10 Florida House of Representatives, Fact Sheet, “Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education Program,” [http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/FileStores/Web/HouseContent/Approved/Web%20Site/education_fact_sheets/2011/documents/2010-11%20Voluntary%20Prekindergarten%20\(VPK\)%20Education%20Program.3.pdf](http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/FileStores/Web/HouseContent/Approved/Web%20Site/education_fact_sheets/2011/documents/2010-11%20Voluntary%20Prekindergarten%20(VPK)%20Education%20Program.3.pdf).

11 Meagan Batdorff et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequality Expands,” Florida section (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, School Choice Demonstration Project, April 2014), <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/charter-funding-inequity-expands-fl.pdf>.