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Florida's Researcher/Practitioner School Readiness Partnership: Opportunities and Potential

A Report from the Florida Network of School Readiness Hubs

Executive Summary

Florida Institute of Education
at the University of North Florida

Florida's Researcher/Practitioner School Readiness Partnership: Opportunities and Potential

A Report from the Florida Network of School Readiness Hubs

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Addressing New Challenges

On February 17, 2000, the then-Board of Regents for the State University System of Florida responded to the passage of the 1999 School Readiness Act by approving an agenda to support Florida's efforts to create a high-quality school readiness system. The agenda called on Florida's public universities to work with local school readiness coalitions to improve the quality of readiness services provided to children across the state.

Under the leadership of the Florida Institute of Education (FIE), 10 public universities formed the Florida Network of School Readiness Hubs (*Florida Readiness Hubs Network*) as a way to implement the new agenda to support school readiness in Florida. The *Florida Readiness Hubs Network* adapted the successful agricultural cooperative extension model of "extending" university resources to address newly emerging public needs that impact both local communities and state prosperity.

Working collaboratively, FIE sought and secured funding from a federal appropriation through a U.S. Department of Education grant for approximately \$2 million over a 6-year period. Early learning coalition partners—representing Florida's diversity in terms of geographical location and population density—and university partners identified problems of practice that became the focus for the *Florida Readiness Hubs Network*. University faculty translated research findings into promising strategies that were tested in the field. Effective strategies were disseminated to other readiness coalitions across the state.

The small-scale study—referred to as the *Hubs Pilot*—is the focus of the full report. The full report describes the strategies used to implement and field-test this model, the results of the applied research efforts for each of the 10 *Regional Readiness Hubs*, and proposes steps that will build on these productive results.

Like the extension model established by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, the *Florida Readiness Hubs Network* demonstrated that research conducted in the universities can be quickly applied to immediate and emerging issues in local communities.

Florida Is Off to a Good Start

Florida, a large and rapidly growing state, has a reputation as a retirement haven. However, a large number of the nation's children – nearly 6% of all children in America under age 5 are Floridians. According to Bartik (2006), 65-75% of these children are likely to continue to live in the state during their working years. With an annual birth rate of more than 220,000 (Florida Department of Health, 2005), the question becomes: "How can Florida keep up with the demands of a growing population and take advantage of the promise that lies with its youth?"

Clearly, improving the quality of educational services—beginning with school readiness—is one key component. Florida voters, the Legislature, governmental agencies, practitioners, and researchers have recognized that preschool quality matters, and they have taken significant actions to improve the quality of Florida's school readiness services.

Likewise, there is consensus that no single action or organizational effort can create, sustain, and scale up high-quality school readiness and preschool programs. Ensuring that all children enter kindergarten ready to read, ready to learn, and ready to succeed will take multiple perspectives and combined efforts. It will require:

- A commitment to making significant changes in the way business is done;
- A commitment to researcher/practitioner collaboration and information-sharing;
- A willingness to make adjustments as progress is monitored and new needs are identified;
- A continued investment; and most importantly,
- A willingness to stay the course.

Providing high-quality programs for all children cannot be left to chance, and the knowledge needed to create excellence cannot remain locked in silos, remote and inaccessible.

Next Steps

The *Hubs Pilot* demonstrated the feasibility and productivity of a collaborative partnership that brings researchers and practitioners together to address the needs of local communities across Florida.

The *Hubs Pilot* partnerships provide both a resource and a model that can be used to build a needed and responsive school readiness and voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) support system that draws on research and links grassroots needs with new kinds of delivery mechanisms, state-level expertise, and uses tools already in place (e.g., research-based performance standards, readiness screening system).

The *Hubs Pilot* researcher/practitioner partners stand ready to join other key school readiness stakeholders at the local and state levels to help Florida become the leader in:

- building a high-quality school readiness and VPK system,
- leveraging both practice and research,
- facilitating development of shared goals,
- addressing locally identified needs,
- sharing what is learned across communities, and
- realizing high levels of achievement for children and adults alike.

Florida is now poised to take a key step toward achieving excellence: building a responsive, well-connected and coordinated research- and standards-based support system for the school readiness sector.

Key Finding: The Hubs Model Is Productive

The work of the *Hubs Pilot* was organized into two phases that produced useful and timely outcomes:

Phase 1

- Initially, the *Hubs Pilot* worked with 57 coalitions (later restructured into 31 coalitions) across the state, and provided assistance as local coalitions were examining existing services; conducting needs assessments; and developing a blueprint for a high-quality, comprehensive, seamless system of services for children birth to 5;
- The *Hubs Liaisons* worked with early childhood stakeholders within their respective regions to gather practitioner input for a proposed framework for an articulated career path for school readiness-related professionals submitted to the state-level articulation committee.
- Hubs Pilot* partners responded to then-Governor Jeb Bush's request to assist the newly formed coalitions in developing and submitting Early Reading First grant applications.

Phase 2

- In the second phase, the *Hubs Pilot* took a more targeted focus, working with a small set of local coalitions to address specific locally identified problems of practice:
- Eight *Regional Readiness Hubs* focused their local efforts on:
 - improving school readiness classroom practices;
 - testing the effectiveness of specific curricula;
 - creating and field-testing professional development modules in mathematics and science;
 - creating an assessment tool for addressing issues of continuity of care;
 - developing and field-testing a tool to help practitioners identify and address adjustment difficulties children may experience during transitions in early care and learning settings; and/or
 - testing strategies to more effectively infuse literacy activities throughout the curriculum.
- Two *Regional Readiness Hubs* focused their local efforts on:
 - building families' knowledge and skills to help them more effectively carry out the important role they play in their children's learning and development;
 - building families' capacity to help their children develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to become successful readers; and/or
 - helping families recognize the impact of the differences and/or similarities between the cultures of home and school and what can be done to make them more congruent.

High-Quality Child Care and Education: An Excellent Investment for a Growing State

Evidence continues to mount that high-quality, intensive early childhood interventions—particularly for children from low-income families—have lasting positive impacts and are much more cost effective than later remediation efforts. Children who get off to a good start in kindergarten tend to maintain that advantage as they progress through school (Boethel, 2004). Economists Heckman and Krueger (2003) reported that the economic return for high-quality interventions is higher than any other youth-centered intervention (see Figure 1).

These economic analyses are supported by the longitudinal research of three high-quality preschool programs: Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, and the Carolina Abecedarian Project. The Perry Preschool and Carolina Abecedarian projects were model programs, while the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program was a model program brought to scale.

Researchers found that children participating in high-quality early care and learning programs were *more likely* to:

- Be employed at age 40,
- Earn higher wages,
- Own a home and car, and
- Have a savings account, and enjoy financial independence (Schweinhardt et al., 2005).

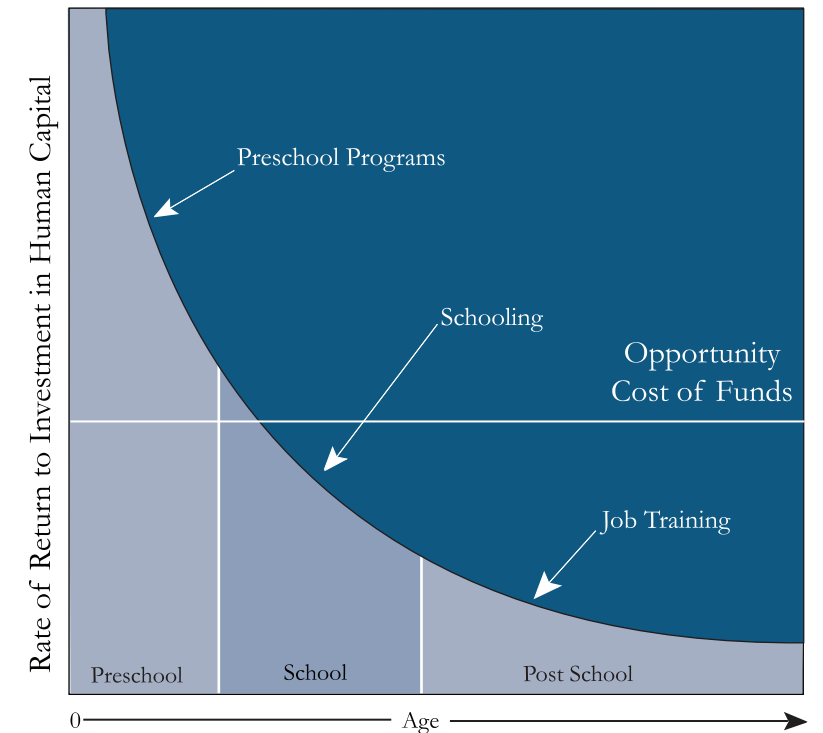


Figure 1. Rates of return to human capital investment, initially setting investment to be equal across all ages.¹

Participating children were *less likely* to:

- Repeat a grade,
- Be referred to special education, resulting in significant savings for state governments (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001),
- Be arrested as juveniles, and
- Commit violent crimes, reducing prison and rehabilitation costs (Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2006).

Longitudinal cost-effectiveness studies suggest that states might expect savings of \$7 for every dollar spent and save more than \$10,000 for every child not enrolled in special education services—a return to society of more than \$40,000 for every participant.

¹From *Inequality in America: What Role for Human Capital Policies?* by J. Heckman and A. Krueger, 2003 (B. Friedman, Ed.). Copyright 2003 The MIT Press. Adapted with permission of MIT Press (<http://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262582605/>).

High-Quality Child Care and Education: An Elusive Goal

Despite recent research findings and public recognition of the importance of high-quality care and education of young children, early care remains underfinanced, unevenly staffed, highly fragmented, and poorly connected to recent research findings. National assessments of program quality indicate that many preschool programs are of mediocre to poor quality (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). Gallagher and Clifford (2000) argue that quality care for young children outside the home lacks “a comprehensive infrastructure or support system to stand behind the delivery of services to the child or family” (p.1).

Hubs Pilot: A Strategy for Improving Quality

The purpose of the *Hubs Pilot* initiative was to design and field-test the effectiveness of a collaborative two-tiered school readiness support structure that would help local school readiness coalitions and frontline practitioners develop the capabilities they need to provide high-quality child care and education services for all children, but especially those children at risk of future academic failure. Throughout the initiative, emphasis was given to early literacy.

Ten *Regional Readiness Hubs* were established across the state (see *Figure 2*). These Hubs were co-chaired by the university readiness liaison (a faculty member with expertise in early childhood education, research, or child development) and an early learning coalition representative. Each Hub focused on a pressing local readiness issue impacting readiness services quality. FIE convened a state-level researcher/practitioner

implementation team where challenges were shared, expertise across the state was tapped, progress was reported, strategies for overcoming encountered barriers were identified, and communication across traditional boundaries was enhanced. Like the agricultural extension model, the *Hubs Pilot* enabled research conducted in the universities to be quickly applied to immediate and emerging early learning issues in local communities.

The *Hubs Pilot* demonstrated that a statewide researcher/practitioner partnership that targets local-level needs, conducts focused applied research, connects state-level expertise, and facilitates collaboration, is a viable tool as Florida seeks to strengthen a critical and strategic 21st century resource: educational excellence for all citizens.

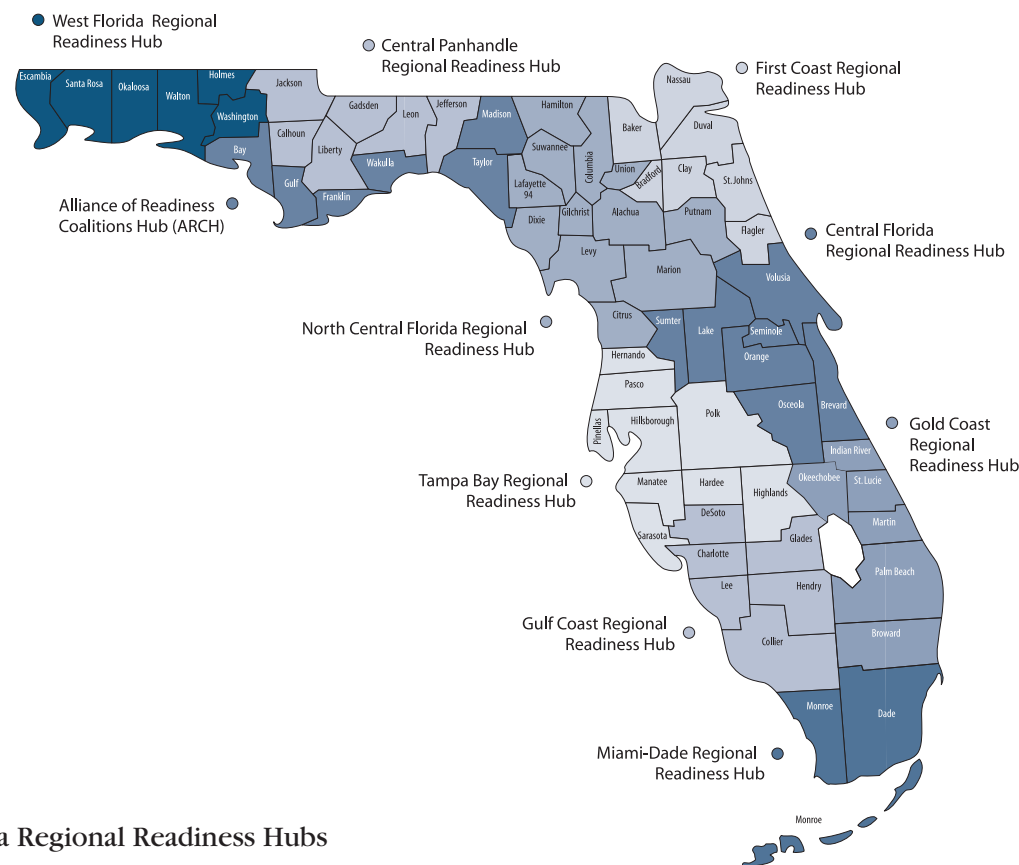


Figure 2. Florida Regional Readiness Hubs

The Hubs Pilot: Key Findings

The *Hubs Pilot* sought to answer the following question:

Can a support mechanism based on collaboration between local early learning coalitions and universities address locally identified problems—with local delivery and accountability—while also serving as a statewide school readiness support system?

Key Finding: The Hubs Model Builds Capacity

While the *Hubs Pilot* encountered typical collaborative challenges (e.g., time, trust, relationships, recruitment of participants, variability in leadership, and communication) and child care industry challenges (e.g., staff turnover, conflicting priorities, limited resources, lack of familiarity with each other’s programs, and program needs), the *Regional Readiness Hubs* were able to leverage their efforts to other initiatives larger than the projects first fueled by the *Hubs Pilot* funds.

Each partner—university and community—discovered common ground and developed ways to draw upon each other’s special expertise. University faculty were invited to sit on coalition boards, and coalition members were seated on university committees. University faculty

served as consultants on topics of local interest and used what was learned during the *Hubs Pilot* to develop coursework and create articulation agreements with community colleges.

The *Hubs Pilot* initiative helped university researchers clarify research and develop projects that were strong and compelling—so compelling that they attracted additional state and federal funding. For example, an endowed university research professorship was awarded to enable one faculty member to continue her research. In another case, a coalition secured federal funding to examine the relationship between parent involvement and early literacy experiences of young children.

Key Finding: The Hubs Model Is Feasible

The *Hubs Pilot* demonstrated that a two-tiered researcher/practitioner partnership could be successfully established and sustained through 10 *Regional Hubs* and a state-level support network. The *Regional Hubs*, chaired by a researcher and a local coalition practitioner, built capacities of partner individuals and organizations, improved school readiness services, and extended the research and practice knowledge bases accessible to Florida’s frontline practitioners and early childhood researchers.

The *Hubs Pilot* state-level component, chaired by FIE, played a pivotal role in:

- linking researchers and practitioners across the state;
- providing a forum for accessing new information and tackling common and uncommon challenges; and
- establishing a shared vision that spanned traditional organizational boundaries and commitment to realizing that vision in every Florida community.