

A Virtual School Readiness Incubator
Final Report
2006-2007: Prototype Development and Small Scale Pilot-Testing
2007-2008: No-Cost Extension

I. National Significance

There is growing recognition that high-quality early childhood education services are critical component to our nation's future. Yet, recent research documents that children come to school with large disparities in the levels of knowledge and skills they bring to kindergarten. Research also documents that participating in high-quality prekindergarten programs is the single best investment for improving achievement, especially for those children at-risk of future academic failure.

Currently, "readiness gaps" persist and, as a result, achievement gaps between children from low-income and high-income families continue to widen as children progress through school. If we are to ensure "no child is left behind," all children must begin school with an equal chance at achievement. To do so, requires dramatically improving the quality and rigor of prekindergarten programs across diverse delivery systems (e.g., school-based, private, not-for-profit, faith-based, and Head Start).

II. The Challenge

States and local communities are faced with the daunting challenge of helping early child care providers move from custodial care to implementing programs that prepare children to enter kindergarten and level the playing field for future academic success. The current early child care industry, now charged with preparing all children to come to school ready to read and learn, face **3 major hurdles:**

- 1. Many early child care programs. . .**
 - lack a *shared vision* excellence and high expectations for all children;
 - are *unevenly staffed*;
 - have *unfocused and fragmented educational programs*;
 - are *poorly connected to scientifically-based research findings* about what works to ensure all children enter school ready to read and to learn;
 - *do not use time wisely* in ways that provide children quality learning opportunities;
 - *do not use assessment results* to: make decisions about improving teaching and learning, to identify children needing special help, or to answer outcomes questions;
 - do not ensure teachers and staff have *access to research-based and sustained professional development opportunities* that are directly tied to expected outcomes for children; and
 - *do not actively involve families* in their children's learning.

- 2. Many early child care programs lack the external support they need to build capacity to: a) consistently and effectively address these challenges**

to bring about improvement on an ongoing basis, and b) operate as an outcome-oriented system; and

3. Many early childcare programs are small businesses that are poorly connected to best business practices.

III. Multi-Year Project Overview:

The primary goal of this multi-year **Virtual School Readiness Incubator** project was to *design a support model* communities can use to accelerate the formation, growth, and success rates of early care and learning programs, resulting in dramatically improved readiness outcomes for the children they serve. The **Virtual School Readiness Incubator** project also leveraged efforts underway in Jacksonville and *designed and field tested a set of capacity-building and support tools* that draws on research and best practices from business and education to help child care entrepreneurs and providers transform their current programs into high-quality programs that consistently produce positive readiness outcomes for all children. The **Virtual School Readiness Incubator** project consisted of four strategies organized into ten measurable objectives.

IV. Project Objectives, Activities, Accomplishments, and Challenges

Note: The VSRI initiative was conceived as a multi-year initiative. The 2006-07 activities focused on completion of planning and prototype development, and small-scale pilot-tests. Some pilot-testing activities were carried out with partnership funds. All objectives were completed except for Objective 5. A no-cost extension (2007-08) was requested and approved to complete Objective 5.

Strategy 1: Develop a Model to Integrate Expectations, Standards, Inquiry, and Accountability.

Objective 1: Synthesize and organize evidence- and research-based school readiness program and child outcomes into a coherent system aligned with state and local standards to improve the quality of school readiness services.

- The work to synthesize and align the Florida school readiness standards has been completed. A briefing paper was developed that provides the background information related to the development of the standards and the alignment of the standards to the instruments that comprise the *Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS)*. The briefing paper is posted to the FIE Web site www.unf.edu/dept/FIE/current_pubs.html and found in Appendix A. Objective 1 was completed.

Objective 2: Identify a set of Jacksonville ready-child indicators; develop consensus in the community around the indicators; identify possible structures for a data partnership to access existing data and for the collection of additional data.

- Dr. Katherine Kasten, chair of the Indicators Work Team, compiled the findings from the series of community meetings conducted during 2005-06. Prepared in Fall 2006, the report was to be presented to the Jacksonville Early Literacy Partnership (JELP) group for their recommendations regarding the need to gather additional data. However, JELP activity was suspended from October 2006 through February 2007. At the March meeting, a new person was identified by

the Mayor of Jacksonville to chair the JELP and efforts to establish a data partnership were placed in abeyance. As a result, the Indicators Report (see Appendix B) documented completion of this objective.

- Results were presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration, November 4, 2006, Atlantic Beach, FL.

Objective 3a: Develop a collaborative applied evaluation research model that draws from participatory evaluation strategies,¹ logic-planning model,² and “theory of change” approaches to evaluation quantitative research methodologies.³ Over the course of the five-year project, the “learning- and systems-focused” evaluation research model will be used to make the change theory explicit, articulate planned activities with their intended outcomes, collect and provide formative feedback to work teams and stakeholders, collaboratively develop appropriate indicators of progress, determine the extent to which project objectives are achieved, and assess the extent to which various readiness-related prototypes contribute to achieving project goals for children and adult learners.

Objective 3b: Develop an outcome-based, data-driven evaluation plan documenting the extent to which annual yearly objectives and milestones have been met and provide a straightforward reporting of the achievement of specific tasks and activities as they occur within and across project years.

The Jacksonville Early Literacy Partnership (JELP) Policy Council provided feedback for development of the model. The prototype design was used to carry out JELP evaluation activities. Two strategic initiatives continue to drive the work of JELP: *Improving Preschool Quality* and *Strengthening Community Engagement*. *Improving Preschool Quality* involves providing support for child care centers, support for teachers, and support for directors. *Strengthening Community Engagement* is a two-prong initiative that includes citywide engagement and neighborhood engagement that can have citywide implications. The strategic initiatives are supported through two support initiatives: *accountability and evaluation* and *communication*.

Jacksonville Early Literacy Partnership



Working collaboratively with practitioner partners, a prototype *applied evaluation research and support model* was developed. The model includes a set of aligned capacity-building activities that were implemented using an incubator delivery structure of intensive and targeted support to achieve specific objectives. The Jacksonville Quality Support System is the prototype for a “learning- and systems-focused” evaluation research and support model specified in this objective (see Appendix C). The focus of 2006/07 activities was to conduct a field test the model and answer the following *Guiding Questions*:

1. To what extent does the QSS provide the support and technical assistance that centers in the community need to deliver “high-quality care and early learning services that result in demonstrated positive outcomes for all children”
2. To what extent do centers in the community serving School Readiness children provide “high-quality care and early learning services?”
3. To what extent do children enrolled in QSS centers demonstrate positive school readiness outcomes at the end of the PreK year?
4. To what extent do all children demonstrate “school readiness” as measured by the *Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS)*?

Results of data analysis to answer the *Guiding Questions* appear in the table below.

<i>Guiding Questions</i>	Results
1. To what extent does the QSI provide the support and technical assistance that centers in the community need to deliver “high-quality care and early learning services that result in demonstrated positive outcomes for all children?”	Approximately 100 centers received technical assistance and coaching services through the Jacksonville Children’s Commission, Episcopal Children’s Services, or the Florida Institute of Education. Another 100 centers received some technical assistance through the Quality Enhancement Initiative of the Early Learning Coalition of Duval. An abbreviated ITERS or ECERS scale and made suggestions to the center directors for areas of focus for improvement.
2. To what extent do centers in the community serving School Readiness children provide “high-quality care and early learning services?”	As of September 30, 2006, 1,001 School Readiness children (4-year-olds) were enrolled in child care centers; 283 children were enrolled in QRS coached centers. (Head Start numbers are not included.)
3. To what extent do children enrolled in QSS centers demonstrate positive school readiness outcomes at the end of the PreK year?	In the spring of 2007, the <i>Bracken School Readiness Scale</i> was administered to 801 children. Of those, 736 attained average or better school readiness scores as measured by the <i>Bracken School Readiness Scale</i> . See annual reports FIE Web Site
4. To what extent do all children demonstrate “school readiness” as measured by the <i>Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS)</i> ?	The <i>FLKRS</i> results for Fall 2006: ECHOS 85% Ready (Consistently Demonstrating and Emerging/Progressing) DIBELS Letter Naming Fluency 76% (Above Average and Low Risk) Initial Sound 64% (Above Average and Low Risk) State percentages were 86%, 70%, and 63% respectively.

Evaluation results were shared with stakeholders and the community at large. Objective 3 was completed. *The child outcomes evaluation process is now institutionalized. See annual evaluation reports (see School Readiness Reports on the FIE website www.unf.edu/dept/FIE/current_pubs.html).*

Strategy 2: Identify and/or Create and Field Test Research-based Tools and Strategies:

Objective 4: Complete a review and examination of existing research, literature, best practices, and promising materials and strategies related to the VSRI strands. Extract a set of guiding principles that will be used to select and/or design needed tools and strategies that will become part of the VSRI.

A written literature review supporting the strands of the VSRI project was completed (see Appendix D) and is posted on the FIE web site. Objective 4 was completed.

Objective 5: Complete a review of existing research and literature related to family involvement and identify and/or develop and field test a set of standards- and research-based strategies to increase the numbers of families living in low-income neighborhoods actively engaged in their children's learning and development. The 2006-07 objective was to conduct a second small-scale pilot and test the feasibility of disseminating the model to another site.

- The VSRI family involvement program (Cohort 1) began at S. P. Livingston Elementary in October 2006. Participants were prekindergarten and kindergarten families from the school community. The program was completed in December 2006 and formative feedback gathered.
- A second pilot was conducted to test the feasibility of disseminating the model to another site. Dissemination of the model took place at St. Clair Evans Academy (Cohort 2) beginning in January 2007. The recruitment efforts focused on the prekindergarten and kindergarten students attending Saint Clair Evans Academy and two surrounding childcare centers. In addition, two families learned of the program from friends in the area, and although they were from outside of the recruitment area they lived in the region and were welcomed by program officials.
- *Support for social networks:* During the 2006-2007 school year, a reunion of 2005-2006 participants was held, the purpose was twofold: to provide networking opportunities for members of the cohort to strengthen their commitment to their role as a major contributor to their child's educational success and to engage participants in discussions of the impact participation in the workshop had on their literacy oriented behaviors and perceptions. Approximately half (16 of 33 families) the cohort attended the reunion event. During the reunion, participants enjoyed a time of fun and fellowship together as a cohort in addition to completing a reflective survey (described below).
- *Survey:* A Reflective Survey was developed and administered to participants to assess the effects of the program at least six weeks following participation. The survey has six questions – five using a Likert scale and one open-ended question. The survey was first administered with 2005-2006 participants at the reunion event. Participants not in attendance at the reunion were given the survey over the phone. Families participating in a cohort during the 2006-

2007 workshop implementation will be given the reflective survey over the phone six weeks after their sessions end. Trained assessors continued to administer the survey.

Institute	Dates	Number of Participants	Number of Participants Attending:				
			5 sessions	4 sessions	3 sessions	2 sessions	1 session
COHORT ONE (S. P. Livingston Elementary):							
One	October – December	16 people (8 families)	1	2	3	0	2
Two	January – March	9 people (4 families)	0	1	2	1	0
Three	March - May	7 people (3 families)	0	0	1	1	1
COHORT TWO (Saint Clair Evans Academy):							
One	January – March	20 people (15 families)	6	4	4	0	1
Two	March - May	17 people (15 families)	9	3	0	1	2

**Total number of family members participating in at least one institute: 38 people (25 families)

- Lessons Learned

- Using attendance results from both the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 implementations, the lesson was learned that an 8-week series would most likely be the best attended. The attrition rate increased after session ten in 2005-2006 and after session 8 in 2006-2007. In between the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 implementations, participating families were invited to host Family Festivals in their own home. Of the 16 families invited to host a Festival, only two festivals took place successfully. This will require materials and the delivery model be refined and modified.
- Recruitment of participants continued to be a challenge. Fewer than 5% of the targeted families chose to participate in workshops and became cohort one. While the percentage was slightly higher for cohort two (11%), the overall participation rate was significantly lower than what had been desired. A variety of strategies were implemented including written recruitment (flyers sent home and notes from teachers), telephone calls, posters displayed in school, and face-to-face recruitment (kindergarten family meeting). If programs such as this are going to make a difference, effective strategies to engage and encourage families to participate must be identified.
- Results from the Reflective Survey indicated that attendance at the workshops led participants to feel more confident in their ability to teach their children, to feel more knowledgeable about how to teach their child, to seek out learning materials for their child, to use daily activities as learning opportunities, and to spend more time engaging their child in learning activities.

Objective 5 was not completed in 2006-07. A no-cost extension was requested and approved to complete Objective 5 by developing additional strategies to overcome encountered barriers; to refine successful program components using formative evaluation results; and to develop a plan for dissemination. **During the no-cost extension period (2007-08), the following was accomplished to achieve Objective 5: Identify and develop strategies to overcome barriers:** The major barrier encountered in the implementation of this project was the recruitment and retention of families. Four elements were identified, they are:

- The project was designed as a partnership between neighborhood elementary schools that offered a pre-kindergarten class, neighborhood pre-school programs and a research program from a local university. Several barriers were encountered in the implementation of this model, barriers to participation included:
 1. Home care vs. center based:
 - The low participation rate of families in formal pre-school programs. Many families preferred to have their pre-school aged child enrolled in home based childcare than formal programs.
 2. Site selection:
 - Many families do not select childcare programs in the neighborhood where they live; instead they choose childcare programs offered by their church, close to their workplace, or in the vicinity of the homes of family members instead. The expected pre-school to kindergarten feeder pattern relationship on which we presumed we could build did not exist.
 3. Personal vs. private transportation:
 - Transportation proved to be a barrier for many families regardless of location. While families from the neighborhood were within walking distance the lack of bus service limited the participation of other families.
 4. Program duration:
 - The original program design consisted of a series of three institutes. Each Institute consisted of five workshops, offered bi-weekly, for a total of 15 workshops. Attendance over such an extended period of time proved difficult for some families.
- Two strategies to address the barriers were developed:
 1. Train family members to conduct in-home literacy get-togethers with friends and families.
 - Families who had successfully completed the 15 week workshop series were invited to participate in a five week family literacy learning training workshop that prepared them to conduct in-home family literacy learning workshops for their friends and neighbors.
 - The FIE Family Involvement Team served as trainers and coaches to the workshop participants
 - Materials were provided for dissemination to the in-home participants.
 - Five families were trained to be *Family Homes Involved in Literacy Leaders (FHILL)*.
 - Three home parties were conducted for a total of 10 participants.
 - Participants responded positively to the workshop.
 - Recruitment of participants for the workshops also proved to be difficult for the trained leaders.

2. Reduce the number of workshop sessions

- The number of sessions was reduced from 15 to 8. Criteria used for the selection of topics and materials for the eight workshop sessions were: the level at which the topic met the overall program goal, the quality of the material, the interest shown by family members in the topic, and the level at which the family participants used the material.

Gather feedback and refine model:

- Refinement of the model
 - Feedback was gathered by inviting a group of home childcare providers to participate in a workshop to test the revised workshop materials and discuss strategies for recruiting and retaining family members over the course of eight sessions.
 - A field test of the modified workshop sessions, conducted at a preschool with their families was conducted during April and May of 2008. Fifteen families participated.

All of the materials developed for the family workshops are available on the FIE website www.unf.edu/FIE/Family.html on the Family Engagement Program page at no charge. Finally, a *proposed dissemination plan was developed* (see Appendix E).

Objective 6: Identify the critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions early care and learning directors/entrepreneurs need to operate a research- and standards-based small business that consistently produces positive readiness outcomes for the children it serves in an efficient and effective manner using focus groups and thorough reviews of research and best practices. Conduct small-scale field tests of promising strategies that can form the core for this VSRI strand. The UNF Small Business Development Center will provide leadership for this objective.

Initially, a business consultant for the Jacksonville Urban League agreed to deliver eight four-hour training sessions on small business development for childcare directors as part of the *Enhancing Leadership and Business Practices (ELBP)* training series for child care directors. In the second small-scale field test, the UNF Small Business Development Center delivered the training. The session topics included: how to develop a basic business plan; how to assess their center's financial status; how to organize and manage cash flow; how to set up a basic budget, manage inventory and supplies, use QuickBooks and software for center bookkeeping, use Microsoft Excel software for project design and management, and effectively use business tax forms and IRS guidelines for tax reporting. The other strands addressed curriculum selection and implementation, best practices, effective strategies, interactions/classroom climate, assessment, classroom environment, leadership, and family involvement in the 36-hour training module.

Training hours	Workshop Topics
7	Increasing and Sustaining High-Quality Interactions
7	Learning to Lead
7	Choosing and Using High-Quality Learning Tools
4	Creating and Sustaining High-Quality Learning Environments
4	Creating and Sustaining High-Quality Professional Development

4	Choosing and Using High-Quality Assessment Tools and Accountability
3	Increasing and Sustaining Meaningful Family Involvement
Total 36	

Although funding issues related to JELP inactivity from October through February delayed implementation of the directors’ training, the prototype, *Enhancing Leadership and Business Practices*, was completed during the 2006-07 Project Year. An open house was conducted in December 2006 for child care center directors to learn more about the prototype and to express their interest in participating in the field test. Additionally, the directors who attended the open house completed a needs assessment survey. Data from the survey were used in planning and developing the training modules. Over 40 directors were identified to participate in the second pilot. The JELP jointly funded a second pilot that began in Summer 2008 and will continue through December 2008. Objective 6 was completed.

Strategy 3: Design a Flexible, Focused Virtual Incubator Delivery System

Objective 7: Complete a review of research, professional literature, and best practices of incubator development and operations and extract a set of guiding principles that will be used to design a research-based, standards-focused, and flexible virtual school readiness incubator delivery system.

The research review for the virtual school readiness incubator delivery system was completed (see Appendix F). The set of guiding principles was derived from the research and used to develop the VSRI delivery system model. Objective 7 was completed.

Objective 8: Identify and convene a small group of advisors with expertise in business applications, educational reform, and professional development schools partnerships to guide VSRI model development.

Members of the VSRI Work Team represented the following agencies: Don Brewer Early Learning Center, FIE, Episcopal Children’s Services, Jacksonville Children’s Commission, Early Learning Coalition of Duval, Jacksonville Urban League Head Start, and Florida Community College of Jacksonville. The VSRI Work Team met on the following dates: August 25, October 4, November 14, December 12, and January 9. Objective 8 was completed.

Objective 9: Work collaboratively with Brewer Center staff to develop operational VSRI strategies as part of its practice-focused research and development agenda.

Dr. Janice Hunter and Heather Monroe-Ossi, FIE staff members, worked collaboratively with Frances Gupton, Executive Director of the Brewer Center, and the Brewer Center teachers on the practice-focused research and development agenda to improve the Brewer Center students’ cognitive knowledge and skills, learning-support skills, and their overall healthy physical development. Tasks accomplished include the following:

- Developed *Understanding by Design (UbD)* curriculum design for the *Young Florida Naturalists*, with partial funding from the UNF Environmental Center
- Concept mapping as an instructional and assessment tool
- Developed assessment tools for *Young Florida Naturalists* science curriculum

- Distributed 53 family involvement take-home activity packets to parents of 3-, 4-, & 5-year-old students to reinforce science concepts learned through the implementation of the *Young Florida Naturalists* project
- Completed grant application for *Encouraging Healthy Habits through Literacy* for the Community Foundation
- Provided professional development for teachers as follows:
 - Concept mapping
 - *UbD* curriculum development
 - VPK standards alignment

Based on evaluation results of the *Young Florida Naturalists* project, both UbD curriculum design methodology and concept mapping strategies were identified as promising practices that could be used in future collaborative improvement efforts. Objective 9 was completed.

Strategy 4: Establish and Sustain Practitioner/Researcher/Community Partnership
Objective 10: A community-wide partnership focused on early literacy was established as part of the Mayor's Early Literacy Partnership (JELP). The JELP Policy Council is composed of community, practitioner, and researcher CEOs engaged in school readiness improvement efforts. Meeting on a regular basis, the JELP Policy Council continues to function as a community wide partnership funding improvement and capacity-building activities, assessing child outcomes, and leveraging dollars from multiple sources to achieve agreed upon activities. Objective 10 was completed.