



# EDUCATION

## High quality early learning opportunities

### BACKGROUND

The foundation for communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork - skills that employers cite as critical to workplace success - is largely developed by age five. High quality early learning opportunities, as well as early detection and treatment of childhood developmental and behavioral challenges, are essential for children's development and later success in school and in life. By age three, there is a 30 million word gap between children in poverty and those in higher income families. By the time children from low-income families enter kindergarten they are 12-14 months below national norms in language and pre-reading skills, a readiness gap resulting in a persistent achievement gap. Investments in quality early learning result in savings in later years (e.g., reductions in grade retention and special education referrals, and an increase in high school graduates who are college and career ready). However, only 4 percent of Florida's education budget is spent on programs that benefit children in the early years

**School Readiness Program:** Over 8,500 small and large private businesses provide affordable childcare through the School Readiness (SR) program, which serves over 203,000 children of Florida's low-income working families. Current funding for SR (2017-2018) is approximately \$12 million below 2005-2006 levels and the average SR payment rate puts Florida at the 6th lowest in the nation. Many SR programs in Florida cannot afford to implement industry-accepted benchmarks of quality when serving children due to low provider reimbursement. Linking reimbursement to provider performance, and improving accountability through coordinated and developmentally appropriate assessments, will improve childcare quality and reduce the readiness gap.

**Family Supports:** Early childhood is the optimal time for detection and treatment of children with

developmental or behavioral concerns. Help Me Grow links families through a centralized 2-1-1 call center so that local resources and programs can quickly and effectively address parents' concerns about their young children's health, development, behavior and learning.

### PROPOSED CHANGES

**SUPPORT** opportunities to improve access to quality early learning, accountability measures for School Readiness, Voluntary Prekindergarten and Kindergarten readiness, and family support services such as Help Me Grow.



Source: Hart & Risley (2003)