



## Spotlight: Florida



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In 1999, then-Florida governor Lawton Chiles's Commission on Education issued a report calling for greater coordination among multiple state and local agencies that influenced early childhood education and school readiness in the state. In response, the state legislature passed the School Readiness Act, establishing the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, which consolidated the state's preschool programs while addressing the shortage of quality, affordable pre-K options available to families throughout the state.

### Summary

Prior to its universal pre-K initiative, the state lacked the resources and capacity to serve all families, which meant long waiting lists and tens of thousands of 4-year-olds, many of whose families were in financial need, unable to participate due to lack of eligibility, access, or availability. The partnership soon developed a proposal for a universal pre-K program to ensure all children would have the opportunity to attend preschool and access the lifetime benefits that it can help provide. The program would later become voluntary pre-K, or VPK, which is not universal pre-K, but is a step towards that goal.

### Program Impact

Nearly 80% of Florida's 4-year-olds attend VPK through approximately 6,200 private, public, and charter schools and private childcare centers. Florida's Office of Early Learning administers VPK and gathers data from kindergarten readiness screenings. These screenings show that VPK improves kindergarten readiness from 54% (for children who didn't participate in VPK) to 82% (for children who did attend VPK).

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, or NIEER, Florida's voluntary pre-K program leads the nation in providing access to preschool-age children, behind only the District of Columbia. The state's Office of Economic and Demographic Research projects that the program's access will include nearly 90% of Florida's 4-year-olds before 2030.

### Florida's Office of Early Learning Widens Its Lens

The Office of Early Learning recognizes the role of social determinants of health in influencing student outcomes, both at school and at home, and has incorporated social-emotional learning, positive behavior supports, and trauma-informed approaches to the voluntary Pre-K (VPK) program.

"We've been focusing strongly in the last couple of years in all developmental domains that a child's well-being encompasses," said Tara Huls, former VPK program and policy lead in the Office of Early Learning. "We look at social-emotional learning that is so critical from a young age, including cognitive skills, especially for children experiencing abuse and neglect."

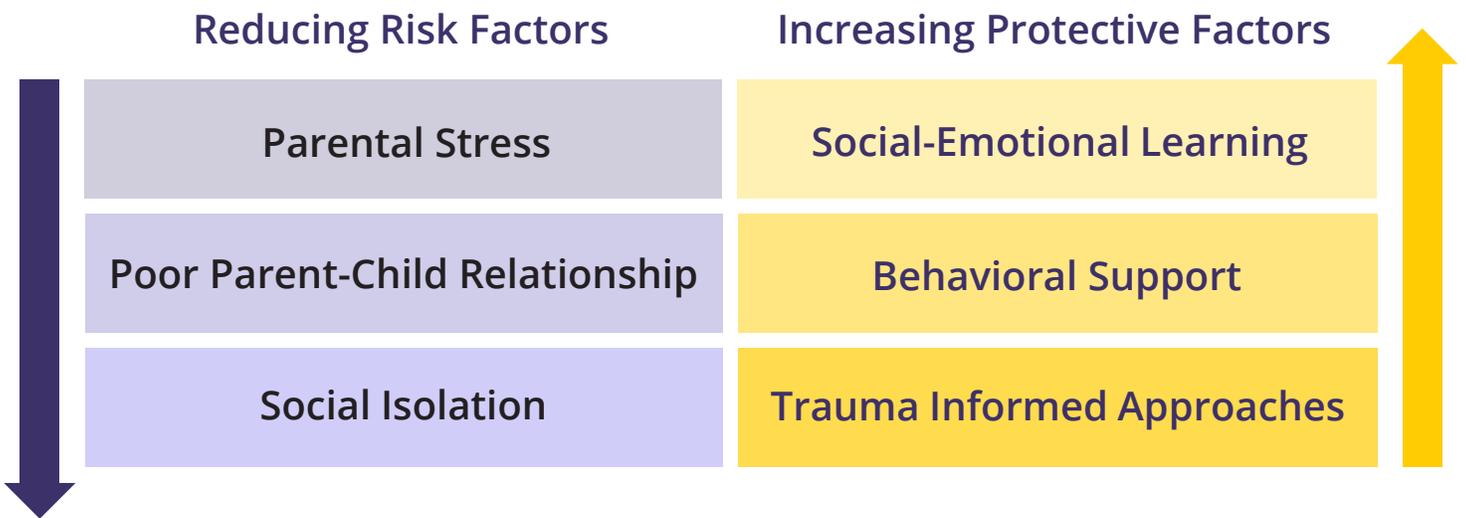


Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

## Continuing the Work

Strong universal pre-K programs can complement efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect by diminishing risk factors such as parental stress, poor parent-child relationships, and social isolation, while increasing protective factors such as improving access to and incorporating social-emotional learning into curricula, providing behavioral supports, and using trauma-informed approaches to foster healthy environments for children.

### Strong Universal Pre-K Programs Foster Healthy Environments for Children



Florida's experience with effectively expanding access—while ensuring quality and building out partnerships—has contributed to improved school readiness for the state's children, with far-reaching consequences. The state offers lessons for how voluntary pre-K can be implemented and incorporated into broader efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect.