

Florida Teacher Salaries: Consider an Early Learning-20 System

I applaud Governor DeSantis and Commissioner Corcoran for their efforts to increase teacher salaries for those employed in K-12 public education settings. This policy direction will attract and retain talented and competent educators to our great state.

Similarly, I appreciate the increased focus on early learning programs for Florida's children from birth to kindergarten. As Governor DeSantis noted, we must improve the readiness rate of Florida's children.

Learning begins at birth and experiences prior to kindergarten are critically important in preparing children for success in school and life. Competent, engaged, and responsive teachers hold the keys to high-quality child care programs. Furthermore, the quality of early learning experiences is the best indicator of child outcomes--including early literacy and math, as well as creative, problem solving and inquiry.

In order to ensure that children are better prepared for kindergarten, we hope the Legislature will consider expanding Early Childhood Educator INCENTIVE\$ to the statewide level. INCENTIVE\$ is an evidence-based strategy to attract and retain competent and trained educators in early learning settings. The program rewards teachers with financial incentives based on their education and retention with their employer. It recognizes competent educators for their commitment and dedication to Florida's youngest citizens.

The Department of Education has acknowledged the following facts in better integrating the Office of Early Learning within the Department, and envisioning an "Early Learning-20" system vs. the current K-12 system. We strongly urge the Department and the Legislature to consider child care and prekindergarten programs as part of the entire system when thinking about recruiting teachers:

- Teachers employed in early learning settings earn on average, slightly more than \$10 per hour statewide with few benefits. Approximately 63% actually qualify for public assistance.
- Turnover is high among early learning educators, and among the 17% of the early learning workforce that holds degrees, there is movement to the K-12 system where earning potential is much higher.
- When the average salary for a preschool teacher falls even further behind those of kindergarten teachers, this will worsen the recruitment and retention of teachers in early learning.

As an educator, I wholeheartedly support increased salaries for teachers, but am concerned about the potential it will have on the early learning system. It reminds me of the story of villagers who are down by the river and see a baby floating by. They jump in to save the baby. A few moments later, there are two, three, four, and then dozens more. The villagers all come together to rescue the babies except one villager who is walking away. When fellow villagers scold the remaining

individual for not helping, he exclaimed, “I’m going upstream to find out who is throwing these babies in the river!”

It’s time to stop throwing our proverbial babies in the river while demanding even greater accountability for those trying to rescue them.

Dr. Phyllis Kalifeh is president and CEO of the Children’s Forum.