

Report praises state's pre-K program

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Children entering kindergarten in Florida public schools are more prepared for learning than ever before, according to a state report released Monday.

The report from the Florida Department of Education is based on screenings done in the first 30 days of kindergarten that measure children's school readiness in language and literacy, math, science, social studies, social and personal skills, physical health and the creative arts.

This is the fourth year the tests have been administered based on learning standards developed for the state's free, voluntary prekindergarten program for 4-year-olds, which began in August 2005.

"These are outstanding results, and I am thrilled to see that our youngest students are more prepared than ever to tackle the work that is ahead of them," Florida Education Commissioner Eric Smith said in a statement accompanying the report.

"You can never start the learning process too early, and I am proud of our parents and teachers for ensuring that our children hit the ground running," he said.

This year's statewide results showed:

- More than three-quarters of beginning kindergartners scored at or above grade level in their ability to recognize the letters of the alphabet, nearly 5 percent more than a year ago.
- Sixty-eight percent of the children were at or above grade level when it came to recognizing the beginning sound in a spoken word, up more than 3 percent.
- Forty-eight percent of the children demonstrated grade-level learning development, about the same as in 2007.

Volusia and Flagler scores generally improved at a faster rate than the statewide gains, with area scores better than the Florida average, except for Learning-development results in Volusia. Eighty-six percent of Volusia children scored on grade level or above in that area, compared with 90 percent in Flagler and 88 percent across the state.

Smith said this year's results were noteworthy, because 58 percent of the state's 4-year-olds attended the prekindergarten program in 2007-08.

That included 3,317 children in Volusia and 635 in Flagler, according to the Early Learning Coalition of Flagler and Volusia counties, which oversees the local program. Local pre-K enrollment now stands at 3,430 children with six more months to go in the reporting year.

Coalition Executive Director Vicky Stark said the low student-teacher ratio the state requires in the prekindergarten program has helped children get a good start on preparing for school.

Assessments have shown the pre-K programs that blend structured learning with play are the most successful, Stark said. "Play is very important in a child's development," she said.

Flagler Assistant Superintendent Janet Valentine was encouraged by the kindergarten readiness results.

"We think it's going to make a difference with how quickly our kids learn in school," she said.