

FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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MICHAEL B. SHEEDY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



April 4, 2014

The Honorable Bill Galvano
404 South Monroe Street
Room 326, Senate Office Building
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Re: Bolstering VPK Scholarships by \$100 per student through budget process

Dear Senator Galvano:

By way of a follow up to Catholic Days at the Capitol, I am writing about our request to shore up one of the most pure forms of school choice available to parents in Florida. In particular, we respectfully request that the Legislature increase the Base Student Allocations (BSA or per-pupil scholarships) for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program (VPK) by at least \$100.

This is a request being made in close collaboration with our seven superintendents of Catholic schools in Florida. In meeting with them as well as Shan Goff, Executive Director of the Office of Early Learning at the Florida Department of Education, we have determined that the BSAs for VPK have been cut or level funded since 2009. In 2009, the BSA for the school-year program was set at \$2,575. By the 2011-2012 school year, funding was decreased to \$2,383. Since then the scholarships have been level funded.

The Program makes it possible for families to exercise a pure form of parental empowerment in education. By this we mean that VPK allows parents to select the educational setting deemed most suitable for their children – without undergoing means testing – at a foundational stage in the academic development of and later success for their children.

Furthermore, a February 2012 study by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) found that VPK Providers – whether public or nonpublic – are effective in preparing children for Kindergarten. Kindergarten readiness rates based on the two instruments used were found to be 72.7 percent in public settings and 73 percent in nonpublic. It should be noted, however, that faith-based providers outperformed all other types of providers by 9.6 percent when looking at study and results from the Early Childhood Observation System or ECHOS and the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading or FAIR-K.

Despite its admirable mission, VPK today is at risk of falling short of the intended mark. Statistics show that VPK is becoming a “diminished return” for Catholic schools. Overall, our Catholic school enrollment from Pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade grew by 0.6 percent from the 2012-2013 school year to the present to reach 84,750. Our VPK numbers, on the other hand, fell from 3,539 to 3,292 students last school year; and dipped again from 3,292 to 3,170 during the 2013-2014 school year. This represents VPK drops of 6.98 and 3.7 percent, respectively.

Thank you for considering this request on behalf of our 84,000-plus schoolchildren served.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James B. Herzog".

James B. Herzog,
Associate Director of Education