

By Representative Roberts-Burke

1                                   A bill to be entitled  
2           An act relating to school readiness; creating  
3           s. 411.09, F.S.; creating the healthy  
4           opportunity for school readiness voucher  
5           program; providing legislative findings and  
6           intent; providing for operation by the Florida  
7           Partnership for Children First, Inc.; providing  
8           eligibility requirements and program components  
9           and funding; providing an effective date.

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11           WHEREAS, the bridge to opportunity for every child must  
12 be anchored in a healthy body and a healthy mind and must lead  
13 to the child's readiness to learn in school, and

14           WHEREAS, it is widely acknowledged that entering school  
15 ready to learn is crucial to a child's success both in school  
16 and in life, and

17           WHEREAS, the state's system of public education could  
18 better perform its mission of educating its K-12 students if  
19 more students enter school healthy and ready to learn, and

20           WHEREAS, as emphasized by the Governor, the President  
21 of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of  
22 Representatives, a child's health in both body and mind is  
23 essential to the child's ability to learn, and

24           WHEREAS, we can make great strides to improve school  
25 readiness by addressing child care, child health, and school  
26 readiness education in one single, accountable continuum, NOW,  
27 THEREFORE,

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29 Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

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1           Section 1. Section 411.09, Florida Statutes, is  
2 created to read:

3           411.09 Healthy opportunity for school readiness  
4 voucher program.--

5           (1) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS.--

6           (a) Current standards for measuring school readiness  
7 are nonuniform and highly subjective. Measurements by these  
8 standards indicate that approximately 36,000 or 20 percent of  
9 Florida children were measured as not ready for school when  
10 they entered kindergarten in the 1996-1997 school year.

11           (b) The Florida Partnership for Children First, Inc.,  
12 is assigned the responsibility under s. 411.01 of providing  
13 reliable school readiness instruments, which instruments shall  
14 be administered under the oversight of the Children First  
15 Coalitions.

16           (c) Under the current measurement system, the  
17 statewide distribution of children measured as not ready for  
18 school in kindergarten ranges from a high of 60 percent in  
19 Monroe County to a low of 4 percent in Washington County. Most  
20 districts, however, are in the 10 to 25 percent range of  
21 children measured as not ready for school in kindergarten.

22           (d) Numerous credible studies have demonstrated the  
23 importance of school readiness to a child's success in school,  
24 and the cost savings, particularly in terms of less dependence  
25 on specialized services and greater lifelong opportunity,  
26 achieved in enlarging the percentage of children who attain  
27 school readiness before they enter school.

28           (e) A recent study of Florida's independent schools  
29 indicates the possibility of the availability of roughly 3,000  
30 to 5,000 kindergarten seats statewide, a very small number in  
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1 proportion to the number of Florida children measured as not  
2 ready for school.

3 (f) The public K-12 school system could better perform  
4 its mission of K-12 education if there were a higher  
5 percentage of children entering the public K-12 school system  
6 who were measured as ready for school.

7 (2) LEGISLATIVE INTENT.--Subject to the requirements  
8 of this section and the availability of seats, it is the  
9 intent of the Legislature to provide a program of enhancement  
10 of healthy opportunity by increasing school readiness to the  
11 maximum extent feasible before a child enters the public K-12  
12 school system.

13 (3) HEALTHY OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM; ELIGIBILITY OF  
14 CHILD.--The healthy opportunity for school readiness voucher  
15 program is established and shall be available on a first-come,  
16 first-served basis to children who are measured no later than  
17 February of the year in which they will enter kindergarten as  
18 not ready for school. Participation shall be entirely at the  
19 option of the parent or guardian.

20 (4) HEALTHY OPPORTUNITY VOUCHERS.--For the purpose of  
21 assisting children who are measured as not ready for school to  
22 attain success in school by enhancing their opportunity for  
23 school readiness:

24 (a) The Florida Partnership for Children First, Inc.,  
25 shall operate the healthy opportunity for school readiness  
26 voucher program with the following minimum components:

27 1. Each Children First Coalition, as part of the  
28 children first plan, shall establish and maintain private  
29 kindergarten program choice information to provide information  
30 and assistance to parents or guardians of eligible children  
31 who wish to enhance their child's opportunity for school

1 readiness by obtaining a voucher to pay for attendance in a  
2 private kindergarten of the parent's choice that has an  
3 available seat and agrees to accept the child. Private  
4 kindergartens wishing to participate in the program shall  
5 submit information requested by the Children First Coalition  
6 for purposes of informed parental choice, shall agree to the  
7 goal of the child attaining school readiness, and shall agree  
8 to administer the school readiness screening instruments.

9       2. All selections and all enrollment and  
10 transportation arrangements shall be the parents' or  
11 guardians' responsibility, but the Children First Coalition  
12 shall provide full information, including information  
13 regarding teacher credentials, and adequate guidance and  
14 assistance to enable the parents or guardians to make a fully  
15 informed choice and easily facilitated arrangements.

16       3. Upon authorization of the parent or guardian,  
17 payment by the fiscal agent of the Children First Coalition  
18 shall be made by voucher in the name of the parent or guardian  
19 and shall be sent to the private kindergarten selected, where  
20 the parent or guardian may endorse the payment to secure the  
21 child's seat. Such payment shall be made in nine to twelve  
22 equal monthly payments, per agreement, in an amount not to  
23 exceed the total cost of tuition or \$3,500, whichever is less.

24       4. A private kindergarten participating in the program  
25 shall comply with s. 623.02 and all other applicable law,  
26 including nondiscrimination in admission policy.

27       5. The Children First Coalition shall provide for  
28 followup measurement of the children who participate in the  
29 program, to measure their school readiness after a year of  
30 attending private kindergarten and prior to entering first  
31 grade. The coalition shall annually report to the Children

1 First Partnership, using objective data, the differences in  
2 school readiness, if any, between comparable groups of  
3 children based on whether or not they attended a private  
4 kindergarten with tuition paid by a healthy opportunity for  
5 school readiness voucher.

6 (b) The vouchers shall be funded from funds  
7 appropriated through the FEFP for a school district's  
8 kindergarten program and shall be made available on a  
9 first-come, first-served basis.

10 Section 2. This act shall take effect July 1, 1999.

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HOUSE SUMMARY

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15 Creates the healthy opportunity for school readiness  
16 voucher program to be operated by the Florida Partnership  
17 for Children First, Inc. Provides eligibility for  
18 children who are measured no later than February of the  
year in which they will enter kindergarten as not ready  
for school. Provides requirements for participation by  
private kindergartens. Provides for payment by voucher  
and specifies funding for the program.

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