

1 Section 1. Effective July 1, 1999, section 411.09,
2 Florida Statutes, is 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 varies. Most districts, however, are in
19 the 10 to 25 percent range of children measured as not ready
20 for school in kindergarten.

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

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

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

5 (2) LEGISLATIVE INTENT.--Subject to the requirements
6 of this section and the availability of seats, it is the
7 intent of the Legislature to provide a program of enhancement
8 of healthy opportunity by increasing school readiness to the
9 maximum extent feasible.

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

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

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

24 1. Each Children First Coalition, as part of the
25 children first plan, shall establish and maintain public and
26 private kindergarten program choice information to provide
27 information and assistance to parents or guardians of eligible
28 children who wish to enhance their child's opportunity for
29 school readiness by obtaining a voucher to pay for attendance
30 in a public or private kindergarten of the parent's choice
31 that has an available seat and agrees to accept the child.

1 Kindergartens wishing to participate in the program shall
2 submit information requested by the Children First Coalition
3 for purposes of informed parental choice, shall agree to the
4 goal of the child attaining school readiness, and shall agree
5 to administer the school readiness screening instruments.

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

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

23 4. A private kindergarten participating in the program
24 must have been in operation for 12 months prior to applying
25 for participation and shall comply with s. 623.02 and all
26 other applicable law, including nondiscrimination in admission
27 policy.

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

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

6 (b) The vouchers shall be funded from funds
7 appropriated through the Children First School Readiness Trust
8 Fund and shall be made available on a first-come, first-served
9 basis to children in children first plan programs.

10 Section 2. This act shall take effect only if
11 Committee Substitute for Committee Substitute for House Bills
12 683 and 2131, relating to school readiness, and Committee
13 Substitute for House Bill 4415, relating to children's health,
14 are adopted, or similar legislation having substantially the
15 same intent and purpose is adopted, in the same legislative
16 session or an extension thereof.

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