

Determinants of Household Participation in Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program
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Summary

Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) has shown tremendous growth, serving about half of the state's 4-year-olds in 2005, its first year of operation, and about 66 percent currently (from 112,684 children in 2004-2005 to 146,710 children in 2009-2010). Nevertheless, a lack of universal participation raises questions about the extent to which program awareness, socio-economic background, or race and ethnic differences may affect the participation decision and raise concerns about equity of access to programs.

This motivated NIEER to investigate the determinants of household awareness of and participation in the Florida VPK program. The research presented seeks to understand how program participation varies as a result of child and family characteristics. We administered household surveys to 1,305 parents/legal guardians of children aged 4 and 5 who were randomly selected throughout the state. Respondents were surveyed between March and June of 2007, and interviews were conducted in Spanish and English (about 13 percent in Spanish). We collected information on the children's current education and care arrangements, family background (ethnicity, parental education, and language), household income, and enrollment in the VPK program.

We looked at the characteristics of families and children and their participation in the VPK. Households that choose to participate in the VPK have on average higher levels of mother's education. Nevertheless, they exhibit lower income levels, and are more likely to have the mother working full-time rather than part-time. We observe higher participation rates when parents have some education beyond high school. Participation rates are highest for those with the lowest incomes, and lowest for families with incomes between \$35,000 and \$50,000. Participation rises again for families with incomes greater than \$50,000 per year. Hispanic families are less likely to participate.

Knowledge of the VPK availability increases with education across all levels and increases with income up to \$50,000 per year, where it levels off. This suggests that participation rates may be raised considerably for poorly educated and low-income families if their awareness of VPK could be raised to the levels of parents who attended college or had incomes above \$35,000 per year. Finally, Hispanics have by far the lowest awareness of the VPK program. Hispanic families have particularly low participation rates at low education levels compared to others who are high school graduates.

In addition, we estimated the effects of household and provider characteristics on the probability of participation, taking into account differences in awareness across households. We investigated the decision to participate in the VPK program using two alternative approaches. In the first approach we separately estimated the probability that families know about VPK and the

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probability that they enroll a child in the program. In the second, we jointly estimated the two, with the VPK participation decision conditional on knowledge of the program. The second approach provides our preferred estimates, and makes intuitive sense. Families who are eligible cannot choose to enroll in VPK if they do not know it exists.

We find awareness about the program varied depending on parental education levels. In addition, conditional on awareness, we find that the probability of participation actually declines as income rises — yet increases as mothers' education rises. However, we also find that at a certain point, high educational attainment reduces participation, suggesting that quality may be an important determinant of participation for higher-educated segments of the population. In addition, while overall Hispanic participation is low, Hispanics with awareness of the program are more likely to participate than their white counterparts.

From its inception VPK experienced a large uptake. Nevertheless, there are important variations in VPK participation across the state. Overall, our findings show that having information about the program is fundamental. Separating out this issue leads to a better understanding of who participates and why. Households respond as they learn about the existence of VPK. It also shows that access to such information is related to many important household characteristics that ultimately also affect the participation decision. Access to information then does appear to play an important role in who participates in VPK. This suggests increased targeted outreach to provide these parents with information about the VPK program might be an important component of enhancing access to such voluntary programs.

Parents with the highest levels of education and families with higher incomes were more likely not to participate. Access and enrollment for higher-income and better-educated groups seem to be quite different and may relate to issues of VPK quality. This suggests that it may be useful to study both the quality of VPK classrooms and the perceptions of parents from different economic and educational backgrounds as it relates to that quality and the quality of the alternatives that they can access.