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Florida Council of 100 Supports the Voluntary Universal Pre-K Constitutional Amendment, by Steve Halverson

As business leaders who have been involved in numerous public policy issues over many years, education has always been a priority issue for The Florida Council of 100. At all levels of the education system, we have worked with the Governor, the legislature and other business groups to improve the quality of education for all Floridians. That is why we in the Council of 100 believe that Constitutional Amendment No. 8, which would provide voluntary, universal pre-K for all four-year olds in the state of Florida, should be passed in November. It is a critical step for ensuring Florida's children come to school ready to learn.

We know from extensive research that infancy and early childhood brain development set the stage for a child's future ability to interact socially and achieve academically. From birth to age five, children rapidly develop. In addition to their remarkable language and cognitive gains, children exhibit dramatic progress in their emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities. The development of these critical dimensions of early development can and should be nurtured early in early childhood education.

We advocate a universal pre-K program for the state of Florida for the following reasons:

First, the scientific evidence of the benefits of a high quality pre-K education is overwhelming. Experts say having a quality educational environment for four-year olds is the best way to prevent school dropouts and criminal behavior, and to provide for greater economic opportunity later in a child's life. Steve Barnett, Ph.D, who is the Director of the National Institute for Early Education research at Rutgers University, estimates that 20 to 30 percent of Florida children currently enter school not ready to learn. State investment in quality pre-K for four-year-olds should save Florida between \$2 billion to \$3 billion per wave of four-year-olds. This estimate takes into account money saved on special education, welfare and prisons, as well as what the successful preschool students eventually pay in taxes.

Second, we believe that pre-K education is a key component of long-term success for children. According to the *American Reading Association Study*, if 100 children emerge from first grade not knowing how to read well, 88 of them will still not read well by the fourth grade. We want young children to start off on the right educational path to ensure they are prepared to advance from grade to grade with the proper skills and knowledge.

Third, we believe that providing universal pre-K education addresses critical areas in which Florida can improve, such as retention and remedial education. For example, according to Steve Barnett, Florida has an 8.5 percent retention rate; retention costs the state

\$835 to \$938 million a year. This constitutional amendment offers a way to substantially reduce retention costs.

Finally, while state cost estimates for voluntary, universal pre-K education have ranged from \$425 million to \$650 million, we do not believe that this amendment is out of reach for the state and citizens of Florida--particularly given the long-term cost savings that will benefit all Floridians over time.

We believe that providing a voluntary, universal pre-K to all four-year olds is a critical step to meeting the needs of young children. As evident in the state of Georgia, where its public/private pre-K initiative that serves over 62,500 children has proven to be successful, we support the passage of this amendment as an important step to meeting the needs of all of Florida's four-year olds as they embark on their educational journey.

Steve Halverson is Chairman of the Council Education Constitution Amendments Task Force, and President & CEO, The Haskell Company.