

Which Pre-K Programs Make Grade?



Burgos says the best thing parents can do is to visit providers, check out the facility and see whether it is being run efficiently.

Scores recently released by the state show not all voluntary programs are created equal.



Burgos' center scored a 260 for its school-year program but earned only a 186 for the summer program.

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FOREST HILLS — Gathered around the carpet, the 4-year-olds gazed at the colorful illustrations while instructor Iris Burgos read aloud the story.

Burgos, the director of Brighter Beginning Early Childhood Center, said activities such as reading, music and instructional play all contribute to preparing the children for their school years. Her center is one of hundreds that offer free preschool to 4-year-olds as a state program.

But recently released state scores show not all programs are created equal.

The Florida Department of Education recently released the latest scores for centers that participate in the Voluntary Prekindergarten program.

The latest statistics show the effect of a voluntary prekindergarten program. According to figures released last month, 54 percent of students who completed Florida's voluntary prekindergarten program last year demonstrated overall classroom readiness.

Any private or nonprofit center can apply to become a voluntary prekindergarten and must meet guidelines set by the state. Students who complete the program are tested to determine whether they are ready for kindergarten.

There are nearly 350 center scores in Hillsborough County alone, ranked on a scale of 0 to 300. The readiness rating is based on how well students perform in three key early learning areas: alphabet recog-

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Keyword: VPK, to search quality ratings for all the Bay area's voluntary pre-school programs.

STATE SCORES

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dition, sound recognition and classroom readiness.

About 15 percent of the state's providers, those scoring below 214, are considered low-performing.

In Hillsborough, 54 providers are considered low-performing. The lowest performing local provider was Play N' Learn Children's Development Center, which earned a score of 136. Nine providers in Hillsborough scored a perfect 300, including licensed provider Isabel Guerrero.

"This is a tool that will help parents find quality providers," said Shan Goff, executive director of the Florida Department of Education's Office of Early Learning. "Parents can search by county, Zip code or provider name."

Once parents find a provider on the state site, they can click on a detailed report explaining why a center obtained the readiness score.



Tribune photo by JIM REED

"It doesn't take into account factors you can't control, like language barriers and family life," Iris Burgos says of the state scores.

Providers classified as low-performing two years in a row are placed on probation and must put together improvement plans. Providers whose readiness scores don't improve by Year 4 can no longer offer voluntary prekindergarten.

But providers caution parents about concentrating on just the rating, claiming the system is far from perfect.

"I think it's a helpful tool for parents, but the number doesn't tell the whole story," said Burgos of Brighter Beginning Early Childhood Center in Tampa. Her center scored a 260 for its school-year program but only earned a 186 for

the summer program.

"It doesn't take into account factors you can't control, like language barriers and family life," she said. "I can tell the parents their children need to attend every day, but if they don't come, there is little I can do and that affects the rating."

Burgos said the best thing parents can do is to visit providers. "Check out the look of the facility," she said. "Are there books? Is the staff, licensed? Do they follow a particular curriculum? The best tool for parents is often their gut feelings about a place."

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PROVIDER	SCORE
Top 5 in Northwest Hillsborough County	
Isabel Guerrero FCCH, Tampa	300
Messiah Lutheran Preschool, Tampa	296
Hillsdale Preschool	293
Kinder Care Learning Center - Premier, Tampa	293
Keystone Suncoast Academy	292
Bottom 5 in Northwest Hillsborough County	
Pinecrest Day Nursery and Kindergarten, Tampa	220
Paradise Learning Center, Tampa	210
Playworld Academy, Tampa	200
Creative World Thompson, Tampa	195
Play N' Learn Children's Development Center, Tampa	136

The state scored the programs on a scale of 0 to 300. Centers that score below 214 are deemed low-performing and are at risk of losing funding.

Source: Florida Department of Education