

Preschool in Fairfax: Start with the Children; Go Where They Are

“School readiness starts at infancy, not when they’re four years old. Our work with VPI partners in advancing quality is starting to become practice and culture of the whole center.”

Rhonda Houck, Fairfax County Office for Children

“Go to where the children are”: this is the basic foundation of the mixed-delivery preschool model in Fairfax. That means **creating partnerships with the early childhood professionals already serving a high proportion of the county’s children at-risk for school failure.** These children of low-income working parents need the full-day, year-round care offered by the community-based programs rather than schools. The Fairfax preschool story is about trying to reach a large number of at-risk four year-olds that could benefit from quality preschool experiences in as many ways as possible. That amounts to preschool classrooms in public schools and partnerships with private providers to reach more families.

To further explore that relationship with private providers, we talked to administrators, program directors, early childhood specialists, and providers to learn more about what is involved in putting these partnerships together.

These stakeholders identified the key components of Fairfax’s mixed-delivery system and offered us a glimpse of what it looks like in practice. They shared the data and details that it takes to make these partnerships a reality and to track their progress. They also helped point out their challenges and lessons learned from their experiences to help other communities.

Key Features of Fairfax’s Mixed Delivery Model



Support continuity of care, teacher-child relationships, and parent choice—go to where the children are.



Build relationships between public and private programs through learning communities and community teams.



Provide the quality of a VPI classroom and create a ripple-effect in the entire program site.



Bring comprehensive services to vulnerable children who access the child care subsidy program.



Use on-site mentoring and coaching to build the skills of early childhood educators.



Track student progress through assessments.

The One-Stop Shop

The Fairfax Office for Children (OFC) serves as a “one-stop shop” for school readiness activities in the county. This office is responsible for the oversight of most locally administered early childhood programs including Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), early childhood professional development, child care assistance, permitting small family child care programs, the federal child care food program, Early Head Start and Head Start, Infant Toddler Specialist Network, QRIS, the neighborhood school readiness teams and other opportunities. OFC was established over 40 years ago to work in partnership with families, educators, community organizations and other partners across Virginia. This approach allows for collaboration and alignment across multiple early childhood programs typically a challenge in communities where these services are fragmented across agencies or programs.

The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors has delegated the oversight of VPI to Office for Children. The OFC then partners with Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) to implement VPI. School-based classrooms serve the bulk of the children, over 1300, while 280 children participate in VPI through community based programs. The partnership with private providers began in the mid-1990s and has grown as funding has become available and this model of service delivery has proven to make a difference. Many of these community-based VPI programs participate in the Virginia Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) and are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

“Each of these opportunities has fostered strong personal and professional relationships with individuals at OFC and FCPS who share information, knowledge and skills, in support of children’s success in school and beyond.” Courtney Park-Jamborsky, Laurel Learning Center



All smiles in the VPI Classroom at Main Street Child Development Center. Pictured here with their two teachers, standing, and Center Director, Carol Lieske, seated. Main Street uses additional funds to keep student: teacher ratios low.

Meeting the Local Needs in Community-Based Programs

As the agency with oversight for the child care assistance program, a Department of Social Services initiative, the Office for Children can easily identify the community-based programs that children receiving assistance attend and have a good sense of the quality of those programs through their participation in the professional development and quality improvement activities offered by the county. Based on this background knowledge, and the structure provided through Virginia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), the OFC can identify programs that are good candidates to participate in VPI.

Once establishing those potential sites and connections, the OFC works with each private provider to bring VPI quality into their program. In some cases those arrangements involve an entire classroom of four year-old children enrolled in VPI, and in other cases it is a blended classroom with some of the children enrolled in VPI and others not enrolled in VPI. VPI funding “wraps around” child care subsidy funding so that working families can access a full day if they need it, with the added supports of VPI.

The Community-Based Providers

Families that need child care seek out providers before their children turn 4 years old. They choose to enroll their children based on many factors, including their relationship with program staff and the early care and education that their child will receive. Partnering with families by bringing VPI to the program they have chosen supports continuity and seamless service delivery. This model is successful because of the commitment community programs have to provide services in support of children's school readiness.

“Many of our currently enrolled VPI children have been enrolled at Laurel Learning Center since they were infants. Our longer operating hours and long relationships keep children enrolled and families engaged in their children's learning.” Courtney Park-Jamborsky, Laurel Learning Center

Laurel Learning Center, a program of Cornerstones, participates on the Lake Anne Neighborhood School Readiness team. This neighborhood-based team connects the early childhood program to the bigger picture of county efforts for ready families, ready children, and ready schools.

About 70% of the children enrolled at Laurel Learning Center receive child care assistance. In Fairfax, a family earning below 250% of the federal poverty line is eligible for assistance (income eligibility varies by locality depending on the local cost of living). Therefore, many children already enrolled in this program will be eligible for VPI when they turn four.

In another part of the county, 75% of Main Street Child Development Center's families participate in the child care assistance program. Demand for quality care is high in this community but Main Street maintains a limit of 25% private-pay families to ensure that the most vulnerable children are not left out. Main Street anticipates serving 25 VPI students in the 2015-16 school year in mixed classrooms with private-pay families. (Main Street is also a “VPI-Plus” community-based provider intended for an additional classroom new this year.)

Children and families in both programs include those who often move from crisis to crisis, whether it's housing or job availability or health and mental health issues. These are circumstances that will impact their education and their success in school. Consistent interaction with high quality caregivers helps mitigate the impact of crises.

“We embrace the parents, engage the parents, so they come in and interact with the teachers. We're establishing trust.” Carol Lieske, Main Street CDC

Preschool students from Laurel Learning Center take a walk around their Lake Anne Village neighborhood. Laurel Learning Center is tucked into an office building near Lake Anne Village that serves as home to several Fairfax County government agencies.

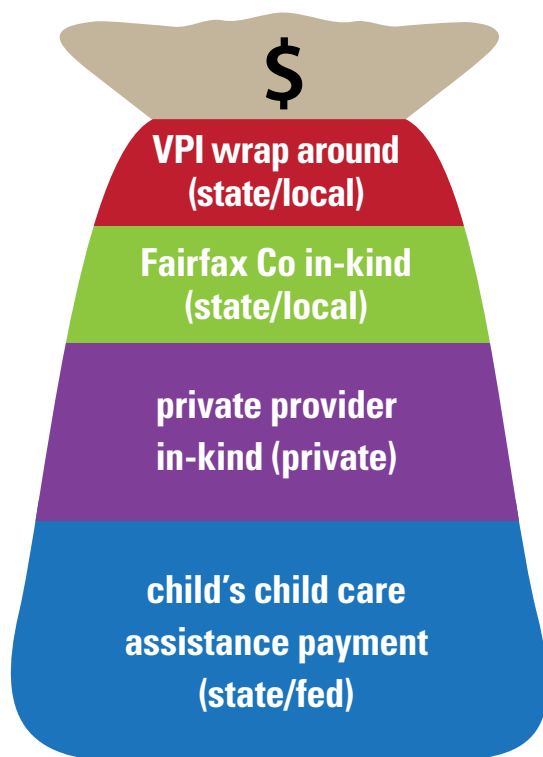


Connecting to the Child Care Assistance Program Works for Families

OFC administers the VPI program in coordination with the Department of Education and the Child Care Assistance Program in coordination with the Department of Social Services. This allows OFC to align policies across the two systems and facilitates communication. It also allows for community providers to blend and braid public and private funding streams to support the true cost of quality child care.

For example, the bulk of an at-risk child's enrollment in a community-based provider is paid for through the federal/state child care assistance funds. However, this funding is capped at \$9,620 in Fairfax County for a preschooler's 12-month enrollment in a licensed center-based program, equivalent to about 70% of the market-rate cost for a full-day, 12-month licensed center-based program. VPI funds pay for program quality support, comprehensive services and Early Childhood Specialists to work with VPI program staff and families. Additional funds come from local dollars to support administration and infrastructure for quality initiatives and private donations to support community-based programs. Funds are allocated carefully to ensure adherence to state requirements.

The OFC's Child Care Assistance Program staff determines eligibility for child assistance and authorizes child care arrangements with programs, as well as payment. Eligibility staff and Early Childhood Specialists work together to determine if families meet VPI eligibility requirements. The Specialists work closely with families and center staff to provide comprehensive services. Both the Early Childhood Specialists and eligibility staff are responsible for entering data regarding their activities.



VPI services "wrap around" maximum assistance payment to fund true cost of quality (based on the scale of how funds are used)

Investing in a High Quality Experience

State and local VPI funds are used to support professional development, curriculum implementation and mentoring at community-based partners. Partners receive a per pupil allocation to invest in training, supplies, and elements of a quality learning environment, based on a prescribed list from the County. Partners also get in-kind support for the provision of comprehensive services and developmental screenings from the school division.

"The requirement to screen – for vision, hearing, and PALS Pre-K – is extremely valuable. So many of our families do not have routine access to a health care provider to get information about developmental milestones or to address health concerns. VPI serves a really valuable purpose in this regard, too."

Carol Lieske, Main Street CDC

The delivery of high quality programming is supported by OFC Early Childhood Specialists who build relationships with VPI classroom teachers, the program director, the children and their families. They provide on-site professional development and technical assistance, and monitor compliance of VPI standards.

Early Childhood Specialists Connect to Research on Quality Improvement

Support from an Early Childhood Specialist improves the implementation of quality early childhood programming. State VPI funds are used to support the work of Early Childhood Specialists with community-based programs.

OFC hires qualified Early Childhood Specialists who provide on-site professional development and technical assistance. Specialists have expertise and experience in early childhood education, and graduate course work and/or certified Virginia teaching licenses. Each VPI program site has a Specialist who partners with staff and families to develop and implement program work plans for the education program, family engagement, and professional development.

Five Early Childhood Specialists support VPI programs in Fairfax County. They are in the VPI programs at least three times each month to monitor VPI program requirements and to meet with the VPI teacher and center director. Communication between visits is often conducted via e-mail and telephone calls. Their work is individualized to meet the needs of students and families in the context of their provider, the VPI teacher and the program director.

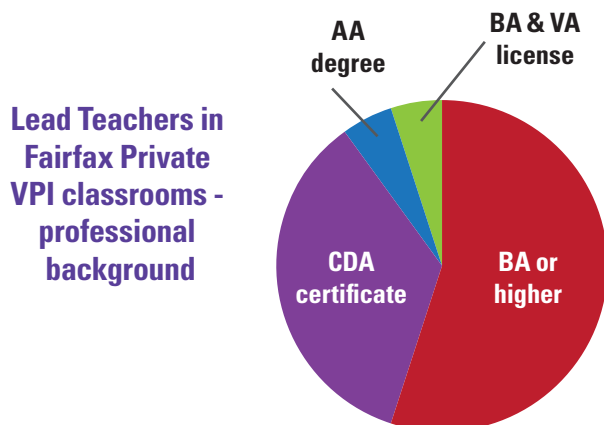
“The Early Childhood Specialists work with our staff to improve the classroom environment, implement our High Scope curriculum, model positive adult-child interactions. Even for me, they’re a support. They’re a set of fresh eyes.” Courtney Park-Jamborsky, Laurel Learning Center



Recruiting and Retaining Qualified VPI Teachers

Salaries tend to be the largest part of an community-based early childhood program’s budget, though low wages in early education are well documented across the country. Currently, VPI funding does not support teacher salaries unless the teacher has a Virginia teaching license. This state policy choice has created challenges for establishing partnerships with Fairfax private providers because if the teacher does not have a license, the share of VPI funds they receive is limited to paying for support comprehensive services, rather than salaries, the bulk of their expenses.

“Some of my teachers and assistant teachers have second jobs to manage the cost of living in this area. That leaves no time for their own educational advancement. If the state is going to require a teaching license, it has to invest to make K-12 teacher salaries possible for VPI teachers.” Carol Lieske, Main Street CDC



VPI teachers regularly attend OFC’s Institute for Early Learning professional development opportunities. They also receive on-site coaching and support from the Early Childhood Specialists. Community-based providers feel confident that with the support of Specialists, and the comprehensive services built in to their program, they are providing a VPI experience that is on par with what children receive in a Fairfax County Public Schools classroom. They know if they meet the mark here by assessing the quality of the classroom environment and students’ performance.

Using Child Assessments to Improve Practice and Inform Families

The child screenings and assessments provided at community-based programs include developmental screenings, dental, vision, and hearing screenings, as well as PALS Pre-K. Each Early Childhood Specialist reviews data input by the partner programs, assessment and screening results, looking for trends. Results are reviewed with teachers and plans are developed that define next steps. Parents are included and supported in obtaining follow-ups as needed.

“PALS data is what we have in common across program sites. With the curriculum we use, we also have access to high-quality assessment tools that look beyond literacy and numeracy. These social-emotional developments are not just important at this age—but are crucial for their arrival at elementary school ready to engage.” Joyce Yang, Early Childhood Specialist, Office for Children

Results of the PALS Pre-K, administered to all children in Fairfax VPI classrooms in the fall and in the spring, are the same for those in community-based programs and in Fairfax County Public Schools.

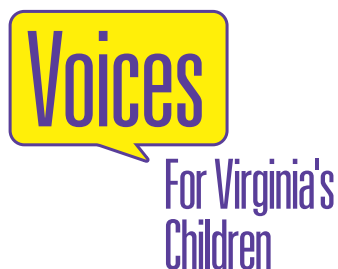
Despite Success in Implementation, Challenges Remain

Fairfax’s story of partnerships is certainly helped by the investments this locality has made in collaboration and leadership. The “one-stop shop” for early childhood program administration, diverse and deep professional development opportunities, and rates aligned to higher cost of living all help facilitate partnerships embracing private providers. The Office for Children serves as a hub for private providers to interact with the county and has helped to form strong relationships over many years. **The Office for Children is able to break down barriers between funding streams at the state level to provide overarching resources to support providers in their roles as early childhood educators, not tied to a program name or funding stream.** Without this one-stop shop or comprehensive approach to early childhood, other communities lean more on state facilitated resources for technical assistance or public-private connector organizations to achieve the same results.

Even with a mixed delivery system, Fairfax has not been able to draw down all of its VPI funding to serve all the children at-risk in the county. Local leaders cite the primary barriers as low per pupil rate compared to actual costs, required cash match, and space. Fairfax has been increasing VPI enrollment each year and is also participating in the VPI+ pilot/federal Preschool Development Grant including new classrooms partnering with private providers.

A challenge to identifying and affording private partners is the **state requirement that VPI lead teachers can only be paid with VPI funds if they have a Virginia teacher’s license.** It would be easier for communities to identify successful partners if teacher competencies and skills were assessed as a criterion for allowable costs rather than licensure status. Teachers in these classrooms could be put on a track towards licensure that factors in their experience, educational background and on-the-job training.

Although Fairfax leaders take on a great deal of responsibility to track data and outcomes of their efforts, **the progress of children enrolled in VPI in community-based programs cannot be followed through elementary school because they do not have a student identifier to do so.** Local leaders are working collaboratively to address this and support integrated data collection related to child outcomes.



At Voices for Virginia’s Children we are fortunate to work with early childhood stakeholders and partners across the Commonwealth. We decided that it was important to hear more about how local leaders about how Virginia Preschool Initiative policies are implemented at the ground level and what lessons we could take from these experiences that would be relevant for other state and local policy makers. We are fortunate to receive funding from the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative of the Washington Area Women’s Foundation specifically to support our work in Northern Virginia and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders in Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax.

Voices thanks Anne-Marie Twohie, Betsi Closter, Rhonda Houck and Joyce Yang of the Fairfax County Office for Children, Carol Lieske of Main Street Child Development Center, and Courtney Park-Jamborsky of Cornerstones for sharing with us the details about preschool partnerships in Fairfax. For more information or to connect with Voices please contact Emily Griffey, Sr. Policy Analyst, at Emily@vakids.org or Mary Beth Salomone Testa, Northern Virginia Consultant, at Marybeth@mbstsolutions.com.

