

Preschool in Alexandria: A Committed Relationship Takes Work

“If we did not have this partnership with private providers, I don’t know how we would serve so many children in Alexandria.” Dr. Terri Monzingo, Chief Academic Officer, Alexandria City Public Schools

The City of Alexandria has maintained a commitment to the expansion of the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), despite tough budgets and major changes in leadership and management. This includes a commitment to serving children in the private, community-based early childhood settings as well as school-based classrooms. **The story of private partnerships in Alexandria is all about relationships, and how those relationships develop trust and dedication.** Maintaining relationships takes work. Alexandria’s early childhood community focused early on to gain support from highest level local decision-makers who prioritized early learning, and then on putting systems and structures in place to keep those relationships in place.

We asked Alexandria leaders what it takes to form successful relationships and partnerships with community providers and for their advice for other communities across the Commonwealth. They shared details about the staff support, oversight and accountability, data, and that intangible quality—the relationships—which make their partnerships successful.

Key Features of Alexandria’s Mixed Delivery Model



Identify high-quality community-based providers with a track record of serving low income families.



Leverage community buy-in and support to build momentum.



Expand options for families in their communities with accessible community partners.



Establish a formal structure for partnerships by defining selection criteria and using the procurement process.



Track student progress through assessments.



Involve local leaders in the process to ensure their commitment.

Making the Commitment to Partnerships



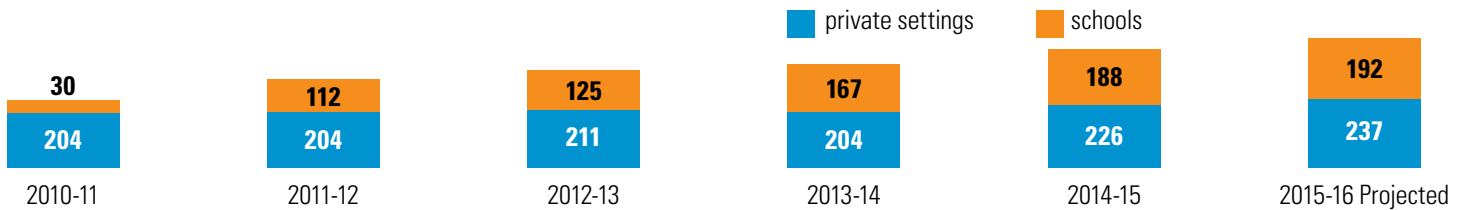
Preschool students at The Campagna Center. The Center provides early childhood educating using Early Head Start, Head Start, Virginia Preschool, subsidies and fee-based child care.

When VPI was first implemented across the Commonwealth, the City of Alexandria looked to private providers immediately to help implement and expand access to preschool. Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) was the initial grantee but transferred the responsibility to the Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS) after the school system decided to focus more of their efforts on kindergarten through 12th Grade. Given that there was only one school-based classroom at the time, the school system and DCHS reached out to NAEYC accredited early childhood programs, many of whom had an existing relationship with DCHS through the child care subsidy program for low-income working families. ACPS and DCHS turned to community providers and established a framework for private provider partnerships that continues today.

“I received a call when VPI first became real. ‘How’d you like to come talk about being a part of this?’ Because we were already accredited, we didn’t have to make major changes in order to participate and meet the standards.” Diane Smalley, Owner, Creative Play School

Growth in Preschool Enrollment in Alexandria

Number of children enrolled in Alexandria VPI



Creative Play School, Child and Family Network Centers (CFNC), ALIVE! Child Development Center, and The Campagna Center were the first community-based programs to partner in the mid to late 1990’s. All of these programs are NAEYC accredited and are rated through the Virginia Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

The private, community-based settings were the primary VPI providers until 2011 when new leadership at Alexandria Public Schools expressed a strong interest in establishing VPI classrooms within the schools. Since that time, management and oversight of VPI has shifted from the City’s Department of Community and Human Services to the school system. The chart above shows that for the last several years, growth in enrollment has occurred primarily in school-based classrooms with a base of long-term community-based partners retained. We asked local leaders how they maintained these relationships despite the shifts in leadership and what Alexandria has put in place to sustain these partnerships.

“I’m glad for more slots from the state. I can make the match. I don’t have a place for them without quality child care providers.” Justin Wilson, Alexandria City Council Member

Local Leaders Buy-in and Speak Up

Alexandria is known for its tight-knit and progressive community. In such communities it is easy to see how ideas travel to gain support and momentum. In Alexandria several local elected officials and community leaders have been well - known as advocates of early learning around the state and even nationally. In large part the community buy-in is due to the foundation built on the commitment and advocacy of residents and leaders—Rob Duggar, Rob Krupicka, and Lori Morris as well as organizations such as ACT of Alexandria and the former local Smart Beginnings coalition. The long history of commitment to improving early childhood education would not be possible without the groundwork laid by these local leaders.

Alexandria’s Framework for Quality in Community Based Partners

- All of Alexandria’s VPI programs are required to participate in VQRIS and many are also accredited through NAEYC.
- Some of the providers are also in Alexandria’s Family Support Project, which is funded through the Alexandria Fund for Human Services. These funds contribute significantly to meeting the VPI match requirement and provide comprehensive services to families.
- Participation in the Family Support Project requires both a QRIS rating and accreditation.

Schools Take a Seat at the Head of the Table

With the shift in leadership to the school division came changes in management, oversight and style. During these shifts, Alexandria has maintained its commitment to private providers and private providers have stuck with it. These relationships are supported by a dynamic structure of management that brings a variety of insights to bear on the implementation of VPI including various oversight roles and venues for collaboration that help to facilitate this partnership.

This dynamic leadership structure includes:

- **City-wide Coordinator of Early Childhood Programs** (see job description below)
- **City and Schools Cross-agency coordination** - members of the School Board, City Council, school administration and city agency leadership meet monthly to review goals and challenges
- **VPI Steering Committee** - community-based providers, stakeholders and city and schools administrators meet to review implementation successes and challenges.

Alexandria City-wide Coordinator of Early Childhood Programs – job description

- Coordinate VPI in the schools and outside the schools
- Manage the grants and distribution of grants
- Participates in monthly information sharing sessions with partners
- Coordinate QRIS for Alexandria and neighboring Arlington, overseeing mentors that provide services



VPI students show off their garden at the Child and Family Network Centers’ Wheeler Ave location. CFNC serves over 100 VPI students in Alexandria.

Management of VPI Involves Both Formal and Informal Channels

When leadership of VPI shifted to the schools in 2011, ACPS hired a staff person specifically dedicated to early childhood education. Her job is to manage the oversight of VPI in school-based classrooms and in community-based child care programs. In addition to the oversight of VPI, she is also the QRIS coordinator for the City of Alexandria and Arlington County. Alexandria is the only school system in Virginia to play a role in the oversight of QRIS. All of the Alexandria child care providers who participate in VPI are involved in classroom observation and on-site mentoring and coaching through the Virginia QRIS.

In addition to the QRIS, ACPS continues to work on developing effective and meaningful technical assistance to private providers. This is an on-going conversation between private providers, and city and school leaders that takes shape through regular meetings of key stakeholders. Some groups shape policy, others inform the conversation.

Each month, city and school leaders convene to discuss early childhood issues in Alexandria, including an standing agenda item for VPI. As elected officials, their detailed understanding and buy-in has been crucial. These leaders are the base of support for strengthening and expanding VPI. The regular convening also helps to bridge the different cultures of schools and human services and to build understanding of what needs to be done.

“It is important to move beyond compliance and move to collaboration. The art of negotiation is definitely at work. We must stay focused and begin with the end in mind.”

Dr. Terri Monzingo, Chief Academic Officer, Alexandria City Public Schools

There is a VPI Steering Committee which brings together ACPS, DCHS, and directors and staff of community-based providers as well. The convening has evolved to take a broader view, acknowledging that VPI does not happen in isolation and these educators and leaders have other common goals and operations including Virginia Quality, professional development, accreditation, and family support. Though not a policy decision-making body, the Steering Committee is valuable for keeping communication channels open and fostering teamwork.

Additionally, the community-led and Council-chartered Alexandria Children Youth and Families Collaborative Commission created a Children and Youth Master Plan, adopted by City Council and the School Board that includes a focus on access and quality as a part of the overall strategy to develop an early childhood system for the community.

A robust local philanthropic community has also taken action to continue the advancement of early childhood opportunities, with a keen interest in a systems approach to future success.

In addition to the informal venues for relationship-building and collaboration afforded by the regular partnership meetings, Alexandria formalizes the partnership arrangements with private providers through the ACPS procurement process. This level of formality and transparency helps providers have fair footing for participation and allows ACPS to have formal accountability processes in place. (More detail on procurement process below.)

Alexandria’s Procurement Process

1. Private providers submit an application with their projected VPI enrollment – the number they have the capacity to serve.

Application requirements:

- approved curriculum
- NAEYC accreditation or VQRIS- rated
- Full day, full year
- a cash or in-kind match of \$3,000/per pupil

2. ACPS and the provider have a pre-application conference to discuss questions.

3. Applications are reviewed by a panel that includes budget experts, grant experts and early childhood experts ACPS Procurement process to ensure the program providers are qualified.

Private Providers are Committed to the Program and to the Kids

The four private providers connected to VPI have worked VPI kids and families into their programs and budgets and depend on the partnership. They have committed their staff to additional professional development opportunities and brought more rigorous data and assessment into their programs. In addition, they have made significant financial contributions to the overall program. They make these commitments because they have a mission and a desire to serve the most vulnerable children in their community, and they know they can do the work to prepare children for success in school.

The Campagna Center serves 32 children enrolled in VPI across several sites in the city. VPI is part of their mission to meet the needs of Alexandria's families, and partnerships with schools and other community organizations mean services can be delivered where families need them.



Circle time at one of the Child and Family Network Center's VPI classrooms.

"We hear parents say that they need options that make it possible to stay gainfully employed plus they need child care subsidy to pay for after care and a private provider is a better choice for the hours they need. The length of day drives choice and this is what is real for families."

Dr. Tammy Mann, President & CEO, The Campagna Center

The Campagna Center offers a variety of programs including Head Start and Early Head Start, school-age after school programs, subsidized child care, and after school supports for middle and high school students. The Center also works with families and adults in need of social service assistance and access to English language classes.

The Child and Family Network Centers (CFNC) has built its organizational mission on serving low-income preschool children and their families. CFNC served 175 children in VPI in ten classrooms in the most recent school year. In CFNC operations, it costs \$10,000 per child for a preschool student. In Alexandria, state funding covers \$3,000 of the cost per child but CFNC must secure the rest, including funds from the Alexandria Fund for Human Services, Child Care Assistance, foundation grants and fundraising dollars.

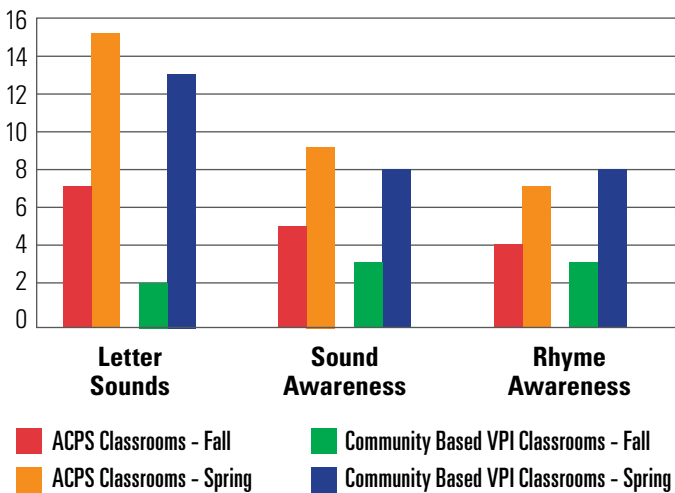
"We've made leaps and bounds for the children enrolled here. This is significant for the city – their developmental gains mean they are ready for school. But true costs are more than the \$3,000 per child we receive. That is a huge challenge to sustain." *Lisette Bishins, President & CEO, CFNC*

Funding for community-based private providers comes from different sources and different rules apply for each source, such as eligibility of families and uses of funds. Parents also struggle with navigating the eligibility requirements, reports CFNC, along with the challenges for families whose work status fluctuates so much. Local human services leaders would prefer to see an integrated approach to outreach and enrollment for both VPI and child care subsidy to make the best possible use of available funding.

"Braiding funding streams – there's complexity AND opportunity. Have we been doing things a certain way because that's where the money is? We are taking the opportunity to say, 'Let's look at what's actually the best thing.'" *Justin Wilson, Alexandria City Council Member*

Data Points- Getting Good Results

Improvement on PALS Pre-K Early Literacy Screening in Public vs. Community VPI Classrooms



Early literacy screening in VPI classrooms show that children in community-based classrooms are making strong improvements and ending their preschool year with the necessary literacy skills, similar to their peers in public school settings. The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) in preschool looks at sub-scales on sound awareness and rhyme awareness. These three sub-scales are closely linked to demonstrating literacy readiness on the kindergarten assessment.

ACPS understands the importance of being able to track academic achievement, and whether and where the child went to preschool. The kindergarten registration form attempts to capture this but the city is finding the format less than ideal in recent years. The reality is that because of depth of partnerships, braiding of funding, and creative service delivery to meet the needs of families, very often the parents aren't able to pinpoint exactly the name of the provider of preschool or the funding stream behind it.

Lessons Learned from Working on a Relationship

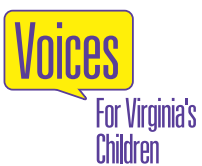
It's a maxim we've heard before—a good relationship is worth the effort. Alexandria has decided that ensuring access to high quality preschool for disadvantaged children is certainly worth the effort. These efforts give parents choice, meet individual family needs, and expand the physical capacity for preschool. These efforts are essential for Alexandria to come close to serving all of the at-risk children in the community. Through these efforts, local leaders have identified some areas they must continue to work to support private partnership.

Given the formal pathways to partnership and the time needed to bring new partners into the fold, **the community must be allowed sufficient time and information to plan for expansion and bringing new partners on board.** Recently state-level budget decisions have been finalized after local budgets and plans have been already been initiated or established. Alexandria's approach is very deliberate—considering how to best meet needs based on community characteristics and available resources. Local planning efforts could be aided by additional technical assistance from the Department of Education to facilitate partnerships and help localities plan when decisions impact plans for the following school year.

There really is no difference when it comes to teacher preparation and continuous quality improvement in a school-based classroom or with a community partner. That is especially the case in utilizing **Virginia QRIS mentors and raters as a key resource for teachers in either setting.** In addition, in the example of Alexandria, the school system can be a good partner in providing mentors to the community.

The collective impact concept is integral to many early childhood efforts. Alexandria has truly gone the extra effort to keep that focus and maintain the relationships necessary for a holistic approach to early education. One example is the community's focus on data and outcomes. Alexandria leaders would like to have access to more robust data systems with the ability to track student outcomes at later grades. Local leaders have suggested that a stronger link to local business community would boost their efforts around collective impact.

Local human services leaders would prefer to see an integrated approach to outreach and enrollment for both VPI and child care subsidy to target low-income families and make the best possible use of available funding.



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.

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