

By Emily Griffey

Virginia's wake-up call in early childhood education

OVER THE PAST eight years, Virginia has fought its way back from the Great Recession. Although the economy has started to turn around, conditions have not improved for kids in Virginia. Our child poverty rate in Virginia has increased to 15.7% of all kids in Virginia. Young children, infants, toddlers and preschoolers are most impacted by the stresses of child poverty during these early years of explosive brain development. At Voices for Virginia's Children, our Kids Count data shows that one in three young children in Virginia lives in a poor or near-poor family.

In recent years, childhood development researchers and economists have teamed up to investigate how early childhood education can produce short-term savings and long-term returns

on investment. They have found that quality early childhood education could produce a \$7-10 return on investment to society in avoided retention and incarceration and in improved graduation and employment rates.

Despite difficult state and local budget scenarios, enrollment in the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) has steadily increased to serve more than 18,000 four-year-olds. Localities and school systems have identified a priority to include local matching funds, often over and above what the state requires, to ensure that at-risk children have access to high quality preschool. The reason why localities keep

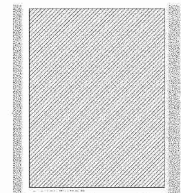
investing is because Superintendents and local Supervisors/Council members see the results. Their students are better prepared for kindergarten and for success in school when they attend preschool.

Some localities leave VPI opportunities for at-risk students on the table and do not pull down state funding. They cite local match requirements, space within school buildings and overall state funding as barriers to participation.

Yet not all at-risk children in Virginia get the opportunity to attend VPI – over a quarter of the students identified as at-risk are not offered the opportunity. Thirteen localities leave more than 100 VPI opportunities for at-risk students on the table and do not pull down all of the



Fairfax partners with Main Street Child Development Center, a private community-based child care center, to offer a VPI classroom for children who are also eligible to receive child care assistance.



state funding. Localities have cited their local match requirements, space within school buildings and overall state funding as the barriers to their full participation.

The right timing

The good news is that policymakers are paying more attention to VPI than ever before. Over this past summer, ten members of House Appropriations and Senate Finance have been meeting as the Joint Subcommittee on Reforming the Virginia Preschool Initiative. They have heard substantive presentations from national researchers, models from other states and testimony from VPI coordinators and superintendents. These appropriators have the final say over VPI as a budget issue.

In other good news, this coming year will bring the signature budget proposal for Governor McAuliffe. He has promised to make education his top priority and is on the record as a strong supporter of pre-k programs.

All of these factors come together for what could be the first significant investments in Virginia's early childhood education system and public pre-school in quite some time. The bulk of state support for early learning flows to VPI, but it is only a part of the continuum of early learning. Also along the continuum are publicly and privately funded initiatives for home visitation for new parents, high quality child care, early intervention and special education.

Four ways to invest in quality

To produce a return on investment for early childhood education, Virginia must ensure that we have an effective early childhood system and provide the opportunity for at-risk children to attend high-quality pre-school. How can we ensure that the early childhood opportunities we provide are high quality? Here are some ideas.

1. Fund VPI to support the true cost of quality. VPI's \$6,000 per pupil rate has not changed since 2008. School divisions report that true costs range from \$8,000 per pupil to \$14,000 per pupil. This means that localities end up footing far more than their required match to support the true cost of provid-

ing high quality services. If the per pupil rate was increased, local school divisions would shoulder less of the burden for the true costs and could potentially serve more students.

2. Support continuous quality improvement in the classroom.

Research shows that teacher-student interactions are the best indicator of quality in the classroom. To ensure that early childhood educators are prepared to work with young students, Virginia needs workforce preparation programs linked to appropriate skills and on-site support for teachers in the classroom. Early childhood has pioneered methods of continuous quality improvement in education. These efforts, through Virginia Quality and the Quality Rating and Improvement System, among others, should be strengthened throughout the state.

3. Establish state-level systems to monitor progress and improve results.

School readiness relies on a strong "collective impact" across health services, education, family support and community support. To strengthen their collective impact, the Governor's Children's Cabinet and the Commonwealth Council for Childhood Success should be made permanent and given specific responsibilities, establish goals and formal relationships with the legislature. There should be a high-level point person within state government with the job of managing the interagency work and collaboration.

4. Target the students who could benefit most from VPI by adopting research-based, but flexible, eligibility criteria.

Research shows that economically disadvantaged young children are less likely to participate in pre-school. Children with risk factors, such as low parental education, unstable housing and English language learners, also benefit greatly from pre-school. Given this research, Virginia should adopt eligibility policies in line with our neighbors in Tennessee and North Carolina. These states establish standard criteria for statewide eligibility, including income level. They promote local flexibility and encourage mixed-income settings by

By the Numbers

One in three

children in Virginia
live in a poor or near poor family

18,000

four-year-olds
are enrolled in the Virginia Preschool Initiative

\$6,000

current per pupil rate funded by VPI

This rate has not been increased since 2008

\$8,000-\$14,000

true costs per pupil

as reported by Virginia school divisions

\$7-\$10

return on investment in early childhood education

Economists base this estimate on improved graduation and employment rates and reduced incarceration rates.



Source: *Voices for Virginia's Children, KIDS COUNT Data Center*



Children at the Main Street Child Development Center pick their jobs for the week.

prioritizing enrollment based on risk factors or setting aside a percentage of slots for children above the income criteria.

If Virginia policymakers move forward with some of these policy changes, we will hopefully see more economically disadvantaged young children participate in early childhood education, leading to better results in K-12 and, eventually, the future workforce. We have patiently and prudently waited to spend our limited resources in this economic recovery effectively. While we were waiting, the economic picture for children in Virginia worsened. The investments we could have made in early childhood education could have generated savings and returns on investment. We cannot afford to wait any longer.

Early childhood innovators in local government

Fairfax County's one-stop-shop approach


Fairfax County has taken an approach to align most of the county's early childhood services through one agency, the Office for Children. This entity serves as an administrative hub for child care assistance funds, local licensing, quality improvement initiatives, neighborhood teams and the Virginia Preschool Initiative. By aligning these efforts under one administrative hub, the county is able to partner with a

variety of child care providers efficiently and effectively. They even administer a mixed-delivery model for the Virginia Preschool Initiative, offering opportunities to attend public pre-school in private child care centers. By creating this one-stop-shop approach, Fairfax is able to identify the needs of a diverse array of early childhood providers and develop strategies that improve the quality of care and the access to care for low-income children.

Alexandria creates formal routes to community coordination

The City of Alexandria has established formal methods of coordination and community participation in the development of local early childhood

strategies. One of these methods is the creation of a "city and schools" team. It is a monthly meeting of city council members, school board members and local administrators from the school division and human services to review needs and progress towards early childhood education goals. This forum allows for cross-agency, cross-sector coordination and the opportunity to continually refine plans and tactics. In addition, the community-led Alexandria Children, Youth and Families Collaboration Commission has involved community stakeholders to create a master plan for Alexandria identifying strategies to improve early childhood education.

For more information visit www.vakids.org to read our "Pre-school Profiles" on Fairfax and Alexandria. 

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