



**Mary Beth Testa, Policy Consultant, Voices for Virginia's Children
Testimony to the Alexandria City Council
March 14, 2016**

My name is Mary Beth Testa and I represent Voices for Virginia's Children here in Northern Virginia this spring as local leaders make decisions about school readiness. Voices for Virginia's Children is a statewide, nonprofit, privately-funded child advocacy organization promoting smart policies and investments for children and families. As Voices works to connect the dots and urge federal and state leaders to prioritize action, we also support localities taking bold steps to invest in children.

The 2016 session of the General Assembly just concluded, setting the stage for more opportunities ahead for early care and education. This includes increases to the per pupil rate for the Virginia Preschool Initiative and an expansion of home visitation programs.

Alexandria's model of early learning is gaining attention, not just for crucial prekindergarten opportunities for four-year-olds but also the important work for children birth to age five, in child care and school-based settings. Investments are needed to achieve access to affordable, high-quality early care and education in Alexandria.

Voices for Virginia's Children urges the City Council to invest in early education including:

- ✓ opportunities for four year olds in the Virginia Preschool Initiative
- ✓ opportunities for working families and their young children through the subsidy assistance program, and
- ✓ opportunities to strengthen the quality of care

Growing numbers of children living in poverty in the Commonwealth – and Alexandria is not immune to this or its devastating effects on young children. In 2014, 16% of children in Alexandria were living in poverty and 60% of Alexandria public school students received free and reduced lunch. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience toxic stress and trauma that has been linked to poorer academic and health outcomes than their more advantaged peers.

The state anticipates even more children will be in need of VPI in Alexandria in the year ahead and so the slot allocation is increasing. This is an opportunity – these are not just slots and numbers, but children in families that live here, who would benefit from access to early learning but will not get to enroll unless thoughtful solutions are identified to invest in match dollars and space to operate programs.

The City of Alexandria has maintained a commitment to VPI, despite tough budgets and changes in personnel and management. This includes a commitment to serving children in the private, community-based early childhood settings as well as school-based classrooms. The City needs to come together again to address the challenge of funding to support operations and identifying appropriate settings as the need for services increases. Let's take the opportunity to explore ways to incentivize participation

from a broad pool of early education providers who could help with growing access to VPI. These efforts are essential for Alexandria to move closer to serving all the at-risk children in the community.

We also ask for investment in the child care subsidy program to meet the needs of local families. We appreciate that in difficult times, the City supports local families through its own investment. You have two opportunities for this – one to assist VPI families with the full-day care that they need while they work. The other “fee system” is for families with infants through age 13 (in accordance with federal law) and it could serve up to 40 children locally. We appreciate the difference this makes for these families. We urge you to consider the 281 families on the local waiting list and direct investments to child care services for their children. Working parents need reliable child care and this is crucial to Alexandria’s economy and to the early learning opportunities of these children.

Finally, quality matters. The City of Alexandria designed its VPI partnerships with quality in mind, looking to Virginia Quality (our state’s quality rating and improvement system) and research-based, nationally recognized accreditation to determine the strongest partners to deliver services. This has made a difference in VPI and for school readiness for these soon-to-be kindergartners. More can be done – and must be done – to reach children and support their providers across all setting types and across all ages with professional development, mentors, and other services as well as investments to operate at higher levels of quality, to ensure that a high-quality early care learning opportunity is the norm for children birth to five.

Enclosed you will find a fact sheet on the projected availability of Virginia Preschool Initiative slots for Alexandria, and a policy brief that we used to educate the General Assembly’s Joint Subcommittee on VPI Reform and other state leaders about mixed delivery.

Thank you for your leadership for children and families. Please contact us if we can be of assistance during the budget process or in broader dialogue of early care and education opportunities in Alexandria.

For more information about Voices for Virginia’s Children, please visit www.vakids.org.