

School Readiness Workgroup: Access to and Quality of Child Care and Preschool Subgroup Report and Recommendations for the Commonwealth Council on Childhood Success

The CCCS Subgroup on Access to and Quality of Child Care and Preschool was given a huge task as they looked at Virginia's rapidly changing and fragmented child care and early education system and sought to make recommendations for improvement. The demographics of Virginia and changing policy landscape greatly informed their recommendations and priorities, and for that reason a summary of this context is provided below.

Virginia Demographics, Demand for Services and its Fragmented System

Virginia is home to more than 600,000 children under the age of 6, and in any given week nearly 394,000 of them spend some time in child care. Unfortunately, slightly more than 15% of (or 279,000) children in the Commonwealth live in poverty; a number which has grown in recent years. The demand for child care and early education programming is significant and continues to increase, but for a variety of reasons the current system in Virginia does not adequately meet the demand.

Regardless of their socioeconomic status, most parents struggle with finding high-quality, affordable care and education. Over the last 5 years, center-based care prices have increased by 14% for infants and 16% for 4 year-olds. Meanwhile, family child care home prices have increased by 21% for infants and 17% for 4 year-olds. These increased costs have dramatic impacts on the affordability and accessibility of care.

It should be noted that publicly funded programs are designed to help disadvantaged children, who are also most at-risk for falling behind their peers academically. Of those programs, Head Start programs (administered directly by the local grant recipient) served 2,400 children under the age of 3, and 16,600 children between the ages of 3 and 5 (2013-2014). Meanwhile, the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) which was created to serve at-risk four year olds not served by Head Start, and is administered directly by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), served 18,000 children (FY 2015). In addition, 26,000 families received child care subsidies which benefited 43,000 children (FY 2014).

Currently the responsibilities to administer these federal and state public education programs, federal child care subsidies for low-income families, and licensing of child care providers, are split between the VDOE, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) and locally administered programs (in the case of federal Head Start funds). Additionally, the Commonwealth has two formally recognized early childhood education quality systems: the Virginia Star Quality Initiative (VSQI) administered by VDSS and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF); and state accreditation of private preschools through a partnership between VDOE and the Virginia Council on Private Education (VCPE) authorized in code.

Rapidly Changing Policy Landscape

Since the subgroup was created in October, the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (CCDBG) was passed. This law reauthorizes the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) through 2020 to provide block grant funding to states to help low income families access child care services, to improve the quality of child care, and to help parents achieve independence from public assistance. This reauthorization establishes significant new requirements for child care providers participating in the Child Care Subsidy Program, including compliance with health and safety standards, on-site inspections and monitoring, participation in mandatory training, compliance with group size and ratio requirements, and national FBI fingerprint criminal background checks.

Though the subgroup included a variety of advocates, public and private providers, business leaders, agency staff, and members of institutions of higher education with unique perspectives on the breadth of these early childhood issues, they were unified in their recognition of and support for the work VDSS is taking on under this program's reauthorization. VDSS and the subgroup view this as a unique and significant opportunity to

improve the quality of care for children throughout the Commonwealth. Therefore, the subgroup included multiple recommendations about how the Council can continue to support and enhance the work being led by VDSS and suggests that the state use the opportunity to look for ways to apply higher standards of quality in settings for all children, regardless of subsidy status.

Additionally, during the 2015 legislative session a number of policies were proposed and debated, in response to the recent and tragic deaths of children in child care. Unfortunately, these recent losses are part of a larger and disturbing trend in the Commonwealth: the Washington Post found that 43 children died in unregulated care in Virginia over the last decade.

The final results of the legislative session include numerous changes that will help improve the system, including: a reduced licensing threshold for family day home providers, down from 6 children to 5; providers will have to conduct fingerprint background checks on all employees; and unlicensed providers will have to explicitly notify parents of their unlicensed status. While the subgroup acknowledges the progress these policies represent, they have additional recommendations for improvement.

Defining Quality and Access

The subgroup agreed that the key factors that impact the accessibility of the early care and education system include affordability (impacted in part by subsidy eligibility); basic geographic accessibility; demand for and availability of services, particularly for nontraditional hours, providers taking subsidies, services for children with special needs, and choice in provider-type. The group affirmed the need for a true mixed-delivery system of care, which empowers parents to choose from a variety of high quality program approaches, such as religious education, Montessori models, home based care, and public and private center based programs. They recognized that each community throughout the Commonwealth has different needs, as well as different resources to address each of these challenges. Unfortunately, the result is a system that is fragmented, unaffordable for many, and inconsistently meets the needs of families.

Additionally, the subgroup agreed that high-quality programs exceed state licensing regulations, including basic health and safety requirements, and achieve higher standards endorsed by other state and national early childhood entities, including but not limited to Head Start, the Virginia Preschool Initiative, the Virginia Star Quality Initiative (VSQI), State recognized accreditation, and accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC). Quality involves ongoing self-study and continuous improvement, which is assured through consistent standards and positive outcomes.

With this shared understanding of a truly high-quality and accessible system, the subgroup then identified 3 major categories of short and long term recommendations: Improving the Floor for Quality; Moving More Providers towards Systems of Quality; and Coordination and Sustainable Funding.

Improving the Floor for Quality

The state has a unique responsibility to protect the basic health and safety of young children being served by public and private early childhood providers. Therefore, the health, safety, and quality standards embedded in licensure create a floor that must minimally protect the health and safety of all children. Unfortunately, Virginia's recent history includes the tragic loss of children in care. By strengthening these base requirements, Virginia can ensure that all children, regardless of setting, are cared for in safe environments.

Recommendation # 1: Reduce the threshold for licensure of Family Day Homes from 5 to 3. Providers should be licensed when caring for 3 or more children, exclusive of the provider's own children and any children who reside in the home, when at least one child receives care for compensation. This reduced threshold mirrors the national average, and is an appropriate threshold at which the provider's care becomes a

business. Implementation of this reduction should be incremental and phased in so that providers, families and VDSS can adjust appropriately. The policy change requires funding for VDSS to implement fully (see Recommendation #11).

Recommendation # 2: Support strengthened penalties for violations of the licensure threshold. Without serious consequences for violations of the law, providers will continue to take more children than they can safely care for. As Virginia has seen, the consequences for such actions are often deadly for young children.

Recommendation # 3: Any child day center or family day home that enters into a contract with the VDSS or a local department to provide child care services to clients of the Department or local department that are funded, in whole or in part, by the Child Care and Development Block Grant shall obtain the appropriate license from the Commissioner. The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 establishes significant new requirements for providers participating in the Subsidy Program, including compliance with health and safety standards, on-site inspections and monitoring, participation in mandatory training, compliance with group size and ratio requirements, and national FBI fingerprint criminal background checks. Requiring subsidy providers to be licensed by VDSS is the most efficient, effective and prudent way for Virginia to meet the federal requirements. One exception would be required: Installation-based child day centers and installation-based and affiliated family day homes located on federal property and operated or certified by the U.S. Department of Defense would not be required to obtain a license. The VDSS Division of Licensing Programs does not have the authority to license DOD-operated child care programs on military bases or federal property; however, these programs are governed by standards that generally meet or exceed state child care licensure standards.

Recommendation # 4: Revise the current application process for programs exempt from licensure, to include verification of health and safety standards. A verification process should be developed and applied where not currently in place and supported in code and regulation. Over the long term the information gleaned from these inspections should inform health, safety and quality standards for such programs.

Moving More Providers towards Systems of Quality

The subgroup identified a comprehensive definition of quality care that accounts for a variety of early childhood settings and the numerous definitions of quality that exist throughout the state and the country. The group affirmed the need for and value of such diversity, which empowers parents to choose from a variety of high quality program approaches, such as religious education, Montessori models, home based care, and public and private center based programs.

Recommendation # 5: Recognizing that VSQI is one of the systems of state recognized quality, alongside State Recognized Accreditation authorized by the Code of Virginia, and in light of the CCDBG reauthorization, the group recommends expanding opportunities for providers to access VSQI to recognize and improve their program quality.

- VSQI management (VDSS and Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, VECF) should continue the rollout of VSQI 2.0, a revision of Virginia's quality rating and improvement system, which focuses on intentional teaching, curriculum, teacher-child interactions and other factors that research indicates contribute to school readiness.
- VSQI management should continue with the planned implementation of expedited entry into VSQI for VPI and Head Start programs. Expedited entry involves crosswalking existing quality standards in these programs with VSQI standards to enable recognition of already existing quality requirements.
- VSQI management should explore automatic entry of VDSS licensed child care programs into the VSQI system. Licensed programs however, should retain ability to opt out of VSQI participation if they so desire.

Coordination and Sustainable Funding

The subgroup recognized that the early care and education space in Virginia is fragmented due to public programs being administered by various government agencies; does not adequately meet the demand; is challenging to administer by both public and private entities because available funding, subsidies and the state's per pupil funding do not adequately cover the true cost of care; and is difficult for parents to navigate. From every perspective in the system - parents, providers, school districts and state administration - there is a demonstrable need for better coordination, improved efficiency, and sustained funding.

Recommendation # 6: Create a comprehensive and cross sector technical assistance system to provide business operations, quality improvement, and blended and braided funding (any combination of federal, state, local and/or private) guidance for all providers. The state should provide robust technical assistance through VDSS and VDOE (or be housed in a new coordinated governance model proposed by the Governance Subgroup).

Recommendation # 7: Conduct a public awareness campaign to help parents access and understand quality programs. This should include unified messaging concerning quality early care and should be jointly developed by VDSS, VDOE and other stakeholders providing and promoting early care and education (or under the new Governance Subgroup proposed model). Electronic and social media should be utilized to the extent possible to disseminate information through multiple systems and touch points such as pediatric offices, government agencies, and other organizations that serve families.

Recommendations # 8: Form two subgroups to support VDSS work over the next year as it revises Virginia's Child Care and Development Fund Plan to meet new requirements established by the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014. The CCCS Access and Quality Subgroup is well poised to provide input from a diverse group of stakeholders and perspectives, as such we recommend the following:

- a) **A CCCS group should convene specifically to support VDSS's child care needs assessment. The group should assist in the examination of:**
 - Underserved areas of the state, including areas with concentrated poverty
 - Where greatest need exists for access to infant/toddler slots, nontraditional hours, care for children with special needs, and children who are homeless. Although not a part of the CCDBG mandate, the group should also consider the early care and education needs of military families not served on installations and families where a parent is in the guard/ reserve and needs care for guard drill weekends

- b) **A CCCS subgroup should convene to support and inform the development of a statewide child care disaster plan, lead by VDSS.**

Recommendation # 9: Create a comprehensive, statewide early childhood professional development system for all early care and education practitioners. Virginia's early care and education programs employ a variety of training and professional development options, but the state lacks a comprehensive professional development framework. Any new governance models facilitating coordination among early childhood programming in Virginia should incorporate a strong professional development component, to build on the work of the Virginia Cross Sector Professional Development Group (VCPD). The VCPD concept should be formally recognized, endorsed and supported by the state. The most pressing professional development needs for early childhood practitioners in the Commonwealth are:

- Establish a competency-based professional development framework for early care and education practitioners

- Explore measures of quality in terms of education & qualifications across the areas of accreditation, certification/licensing, articulation agreements, coursework, credits, degrees; and competency recognition.
- Examine funding strategies to address (1) cost of professional development; (2) incentives to participate in professional development; (3) cost of care provided by more highly qualified staff.
- A CCCS subgroup should convene to support and inform this work. This subgroup would support the Governance subgroup and/or the development of a new early childhood entity/collaborative; VCPD's ongoing work; and VDSS as it develops a state plan.

Recommendation # 10: Adapt the existing data systems (VLDS and VDSS Professional Development Registry) or create a new integrated data system, to capture the data and measure the impact of increased investments in professional development on child outcomes. Such a system/ systems could be coordinated under the proposed new governance model and regardless of its setting, should include:

- Collection of common data elements, integrated across both public and private sectors;
- A database for training and technical assistance providers and the early childhood professional development registry (implementation is already underway by VDSS). Integration of data within this system with VLDS should be explored;
- Additional agencies should participate in the Virginia Longitudinal Data System, including the Virginia Department of Health and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.

Recommendation # 11: Increase financial resources in the early childhood system to fully implement current policies and final CCCS recommendations.