

School Readiness Workgroup: Early Elementary Years Subgroup Report and Recommendations for the Commonwealth Council on Childhood Success

The Early Elementary School subgroup examined four major areas of concern related to the early elementary (kindergarten – third grade) experience: kindergarten readiness; the achievement gap and diverse needs of students entering the K-12 system; coordination of support services in the community; and how to best define and measure success for children at this age.

The group was very clear from the beginning that the whole child should be considered in their work, and acknowledged that all children need to be supported in their academics, health, and social and emotional development throughout their early childhood years in order to be successful. As the group pursued this work, they determined that the standard for academic success in third grade should include both reading and math fluency, and that this benchmark should guide policy on assessments and academic interventions both before and throughout the early elementary years.

The workgroup hosted a panel discussion with kindergarten teachers from throughout the state, from which clear message emerged: the experiences young children have before arriving in kindergarten dramatically impact a child's experience and success during kindergarten and their first few years of elementary school. This conversation mirrors the national research on the value of preschool programs. A recent meta-analysis of 123 studies on the effects of preschool showed that children who attended a preschool program prior to entering kindergarten showed the largest gains in cognitive outcomes as compared with a group of similar children who received a different intervention or did not attend preschool.

Data from the PALS-K provides insight into Virginia kindergartners' readiness in literacy and indicates that 12% of children screened enter kindergarten without the literacy skills they need to be successful readers by third grade without intervention. But the workgroup also looked closely at a recent study which sought to evaluate the readiness of Virginia students in other domains, such as math, social skills, and self-regulation which according to national research are also key indicators of their later success. According to the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Project (VKRP), 34% of children in the Commonwealth arrive at kindergarten unprepared in one or more critical learning domains (literacy, mathematics, self-regulation, and social skills). Therefore, the group explored and has made a few recommendations on better preparing young children, especially those at greatest risk of falling behind, enter kindergarten ready to succeed across multiple domains.

Given the great importance of these early education experiences, while also recognizing the limited resources available to provide them, the group agreed that state funding should be leveraged to maximize federal funding, rather than existing in conflict with it. For example, localities should better coordinate Head Start and Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) programs so as to maximize available slots in a community to reach the greatest number of children possible. Additionally, the group recognizes the changing landscape of the public preschool environment in Virginia with the ongoing implementation of VPI+ under the federal preschool expansion grant.

These values and principles drove the development of the following recommendations from the subgroup:

Preparing for and Enhancing the Kindergarten and Early Elementary Experience

Recommendation # 1: In the absence of full-year public preschool programs available to all students, public schools should provide high-quality, short-term summer experiences for incoming kindergarten students without any preschool experience to increase their readiness and ease the transition. The group made the recommendation based on the proven outcomes of the *Bridging Kindergarten* program in Fairfax County, which has developed 3 week kindergarten transition program for students without any preschool experience. The program has demonstrated that participating students made real gains in self-regulation and

academic skills over those in the control group of their peers. The work group supports the funding of a pilot program in 2-3 additional school divisions in which at-risk students that are not currently being served (school divisions with wait lists for VPI programs, for example).

Recommendation # 2: Any state funded preschool programs or early learning experiences should meet the highest standards of quality and seamlessly connect the 4 year old and 5 year old public education experiences of students. The workgroup endorses the VPI workgroup recommendation that as the state implements VPI + and begins collecting data and outcomes on the innovative models and benefits of expanded access, Virginia should use that information to improve quality standards of all VPI programs and consider expanding access to additional at- risk students.

Appropriate Administration of Kindergarten Assessments

Recommendation # 3: Given the growing interest in and recent pilots of kindergarten assessments that measure readiness across multiple domains (TS Gold, UVA assessment), JLARC should conduct a study of the benefits and consequences of a state directed and funded comprehensive assessment for all kindergarten students. This should include a detailed analysis of current state and local assessments, both mandated and optional; an evaluation of their utility and current duplication of efforts; the benefits, consequences and costs of standardizing such assessments across the Commonwealth; and the appropriate amount of testing for children at that age.

Recommendation # 4: With the General Assembly's recent funding of a voluntary kindergarten assessment tool provided by the University of Virginia; the workgroup recommends that data collected from broader adoption of this tool should be used to help inform future policy decisions on interventions, resources, and assessments of young children.

Recommendation # 5: Increase staff support in Kindergarten classrooms, particularly for schools in challenging communities. As resources have been stretched thin in recent years, many kindergarten classrooms have lost their support staff; while other aides have been assigned so many additional duties that they are no longer providing substantive instructional support to classroom teachers. As demonstrated in the recent Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Project study, incoming kindergarten students have very different levels of academic, social emotional, and self-regulation skills. Additional staff support facilitates a much better learning environment for each of them, and is particularly valuable when teachers must administer assessments, without losing too much valuable instructional time.

Improving Data and Governance

Recommendation # 6: Any early learning or health and well being services funded with public monies should report standardized outcome data elements that are compatible with the Virginia Longitudinal Data System, so that the Commonwealth can conduct more thorough longitudinal studies. In particular, this should include standardized Head Start assessment data and standardized Home Visiting outcomes data.

Recommendation # 7: Endorse the Data and Governance Workgroup focus on improving the ease with which parents can navigate Virginia's early childhood education system. The current system is fragmented between multiple funding streams, agencies, state and local programs. Therefore parents often have a difficult time finding and navigating early education programs available to their young children. Ideally, better coordination and communication can be achieved statewide so that parents can easily access public (federal, state, and local) and community-based, long and short-term, early learning and literacy programs; and health and developmental resources and services.