

Summary: Improving Virginia’s Early Childhood Development Programs

WHAT WE FOUND

One-third of all Virginia kindergartners may not be fully ready for school

Although many of Virginia’s young children do not need state-supported early childhood development programs, data indicate that about one-third start school lacking the social, self-regulation, literacy, or math skills needed for kindergarten. Certain factors, such as poverty, low birth weight, and maternal substance abuse, place a child’s healthy development at risk and can strongly influence whether a child is ready for school.

The state’s information about readiness and children at risk of poor developmental outcomes is not sufficient for identifying children and families at risk and assisting them through the state’s early childhood development programs.

Virginia’s voluntary home visiting programs are generally effective

Virginia’s seven voluntary home visiting programs demonstrate effective performance, are generally well designed, and have strong quality assurance mechanisms to ensure they are implemented as intended. Participants often have better outcomes than those who do not participate, both nationwide and in Virginia. For example, participants in Virginia’s home visiting programs for pregnant women are more likely than nonparticipants to carry their pregnancies to full term, which is associated with positive developmental outcomes. Virginia’s voluntary home visiting programs also feature the key components that experts generally agree are necessary to be effective.

However, these programs lack adequate administrative infrastructure to ensure effective coordination, evaluation, and planning across programs. The funding for voluntary home visiting programs in Virginia is unstable and difficult to predict each year, and this instability hinders the ability of the programs to operate consistently and strategically over time.

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

In 2016 the General Assembly directed JLARC to identify and review state-supported early childhood development programs to determine the best strategy for future early childhood investments.

ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The brain develops most rapidly during the earliest years of a child’s life. The development (or “wiring”) that occurs as a result of early experiences, whether positive or negative, sets the foundation for future success. High-quality early childhood development programs improve children’s odds of success in school and life. However, careful attention is needed to whether programs are well designed, implemented as designed, and perform effectively. Virginia has 13 “core” early childhood development programs, which include seven voluntary home visiting programs, the Virginia Pre-school Initiative, the Child Care Subsidy Program, and two Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs.

VPI improves literacy, but its impact on kindergarten readiness is unknown and program needs stronger assurances of program quality

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) improves children's literacy skills, but literacy is recognized as a narrow measure of kindergarten readiness. The state lacks sufficient data to determine whether VPI is effective at improving other important skills, such as social skills and self-regulation skills, that children need to be ready for kindergarten.

There are a number of design and implementation concerns about the VPI program. Implementation of VPI is local, and at the state level, minimal staffing resources are available to administer the program. Further, the program has few features to ensure the program is providing high-quality pre-K experiences statewide. For example, despite the critical importance of high-quality teacher-child interactions, VPI has few assurances that they are occurring in VPI classrooms. In addition, the state has minimal effective controls over the quality of the curricula used by VPI providers. Many agency staff and experts expressed concern about the quality of curricula used by providers. JLARC staff identified eight VPI providers that reported using curricula that (1) do not appear to be research-based or (2) are not actual curricula.

Currently, the Appropriation Act directs the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to establish standards for kindergarten readiness and directs school divisions to certify that their VPI programs follow these standards. The Act does not, though, direct VDOE to take any meaningful actions to monitor or ensure the quality of the program's implementation. VDOE is not required to facilitate individualized professional development or provide support to programs most in need of technical assistance. Consequently, and in part because of limited staffing resources, VDOE mostly defers to local school divisions to design, implement, and assess their own VPI programs. Ensuring that VPI provides a quality pre-K experience statewide will require VDOE to take a more meaningful role moving forward.

Child care subsidy includes few features to promote or incentivize high-quality child care

Like many child care programs nationwide, Virginia's Child Care Subsidy Program was initially created to enable parents to maintain employment, obtain an education, or receive training. However, the federal government and states, including Virginia, increasingly recognize the potential of using child care subsidies to promote healthy brain and skills development in young children, and many are taking action to improve the quality of child care supported through public funds.

Virginia's Child Care Subsidy Program has only recently added a goal to promote brain and skills development in young children through improvements to the quality of child care. Therefore, it is not surprising that most subsidy policies and the state's monitoring activities still focus primarily on compliance with state health and safety standards rather than the quality of children's experiences in subsidized child care settings.

Improving program quality usually involves additional costs for curriculum materials, training, and higher staff salaries. Current subsidy reimbursement rates are likely too low to incentivize child care providers to spend additional resources to improve the quality of experiences they provide to children. Several other states offer higher subsidies to providers that demonstrate higher levels of quality, with the quality level determined through assessments using state quality rating and improvement systems.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs are mostly effective at improving skills, but data needs improvement

The state's two Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs intended to improve the skills of young children with disabilities can generally demonstrate they are effective. Nearly all children in the Early Childhood Special Education program demonstrated improvement in their social-emotional, cognitive, and self-care skills (92 percent, 94 percent, and 92 percent, respectively). A smaller proportion, but still a majority, of children in the Early Intervention program improved their skills (64 percent, 68 percent, and 71 percent, respectively). Evidence suggests, though, that the validity of scores could be improved for both programs, including a portion of local practitioners reporting that they did not fully understand the definitions of the skill categories used to assess children's progress.

Opportunities exist to improve Virginia's early childhood development programs

This report includes recommendations and options to improve the design, quality, and performance of the state's early childhood development programs. Many of the recommendations would require no additional appropriations by the General Assembly, and several others would require less than \$250,000. The remaining recommendations and options, however, would likely require some additional one-time or annual appropriations to implement.

To fund these improvements to early childhood development programs, the state could eliminate a minimally effective child care tax deduction. Virginia's Child and Dependent Care Expenses Tax Deduction was created in 1977 to help parents maintain full-time employment by reducing the cost of child care. Virginia's deduction is a separate tax incentive from the nonrefundable federal Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, which can be as much as \$1,050 for one child and \$2,100 for two or more children.

Despite the substantial financial commitment that the state makes to the deduction (\$28.9 million per year), the benefit to individual Virginia families (\$141 per year, on average) is too low to have much effect on parents' ability to afford child care and maintain full-time employment—the purpose of the deduction. Placed in context, the \$141 average reduction in annual tax liability would cover only about one percent of the annual average cost of child care—or less than one week of care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require more comprehensive assessments of kindergarten readiness and more useful data about children at risk for poor developmental outcomes.
- Improve the design, quality, and performance data of early childhood programs to ensure efficient and effective use of funds.
- Require and provide sufficient resources for the Virginia Department of Education to have a more meaningful role in ensuring the quality of VPI implementation.

OPTIONS

- Implement a pilot program to provide higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates for providers that demonstrate higher quality care.
- Eliminate the minimally effective state tax deduction for child care, and use funding to improve (or potentially expand) programs that serve the youngest children at risk of poor developmental outcomes.

The complete list of recommendations and options is available on page v.

Recommendations and Options: Improving Virginia's Early Childhood Development Programs

RECOMMENDATION 1

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending Title 22.1 of the Code of Virginia to require all school divisions to participate in the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program. The purpose of participation would be to administer a multi-dimensional kindergarten readiness assessment to all kindergartners in Virginia public schools. The requirement could be phased in over a three-year period. The General Assembly may wish to consider appropriating sufficient funding. (Chapter 2)

Recommendation 1	
Category	Cost
	\$175K (annually)

RECOMMENDATION 2

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Health, with the assistance of the Departments of Social Services, Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Education, and the University of Virginia, to develop a plan to improve the state's information on at-risk children and families. The plan should be submitted to the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees by July 1, 2019. (Chapter 2)

Recommendation 2	
Category	Cost
	TBD

RECOMMENDATION 3

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Department of Health, and Department of Social Services to transform Project LINK into an evidence-based, well-designed, consistently implemented home visiting program to improve child development outcomes by reducing maternal substance abuse. The General Assembly may wish to consider appropriating sufficient funding. (Chapter 3)

Recommendation 3	
Category	Cost
	\$3.3M* (annually)
*Cost savings generated through improved Project LINK expected to cover added costs.	

RECOMMENDATION 4

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to designate Early Impact Virginia as the lead entity to (i) determine and systematically track key outcomes; (ii) conduct systematic needs assessments; and (iii) support continuous quality improvement, training, and coordination across state-supported voluntary home visiting programs. The General Assembly may wish to consider appropriating sufficient funding. (Chapter 3)

Recommendation 4	
Category	Cost
	\$600K (annually)

RECOMMENDATION 5

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct Early Impact Virginia to identify potential additional sources of funding for Virginia's voluntary home visiting programs. The assessment should consider other states' approaches and funding sources, including but not limited to Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, lottery funds, and other dedicated sources of revenue. The assessment should consider the effect on funding stability and the advantages and disadvantages of each potential revenue source identified. Early Impact Virginia should report its findings and recommendations to the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees by July 1, 2019. (Chapter 3)

Recommendation 5	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Virginia Department of Education and the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning should use the results of multi-dimensional kindergarten readiness assessments to determine how well the Virginia Preschool Initiative promotes readiness in all key developmental domains. (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 6	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 7

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to require all Virginia Preschool Initiative provider classrooms to have the quality of their teacher-child interactions assessed through a rigorous and research-based classroom observational instrument (such as the CLASS observational instrument) at least once every two years. The General Assembly may wish to consider appropriating sufficient funding. (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 7	
Category	Cost
	\$250K (annually)

RECOMMENDATION 8

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Education to establish a statewide minimum acceptable threshold for the quality of teacher-child interactions for the Virginia Preschool Initiative. The threshold should be established with the assistance of University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, using a rigorous and research-based classroom observational instrument (such as the CLASS observational instrument). (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 8	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 9

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Education to (i) work with the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning to develop a list of approved research-based early learning curricula that align with the state's early learning standards; (ii) update the list at least every three years; and (iii) require providers to select and use curricula from the list of approved curricula as a condition of receiving funding through the Virginia Preschool Initiative program. (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 9	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 10

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to require all Virginia Preschool Initiative teachers to annually receive individualized professional development from professional development specialists to support quality teacher-child interactions and effective curriculum implementation. The Virginia Department of Education should work with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning to hire and train specialists to provide this professional development. Professional development resources should be targeted to providers as identified through formal classroom observation (using an observational instrument such as CLASS). The individualized professional development should count toward existing requirements. The General Assembly may wish to consider appropriating sufficient funding. (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 10	
Category	Cost
	\$926K to \$1.4M* (annually)
*Depends on extent and duration of professional development provided.	

RECOMMENDATION 11

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending Title 22.1 of the Code of Virginia to require the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to ensure that high-quality preschool is provided through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). On an ongoing basis, VDOE should (i) monitor the quality of teacher-child interactions; (ii) ensure the use of evidence-based curricula; (iii) facilitate individualized professional development and direct more resources to programs that do not meet expectations for quality; and (iv) report to the General Assembly on the extent to which VPI funding supports high-quality pre-K experiences across the state. (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 11	
Category	Cost
	None

RECOMMENDATION 12

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to develop a plan to ensure high-quality preschool is provided through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). The plan should detail how VDOE will (i) monitor the quality of teacher-child interactions; (ii) ensure the use of evidence-based curricula; (iii) facilitate individualized professional development and direct more resources to programs that do not meet expectations for quality; and (iv) provide the General Assembly with useful information about how VPI funding supports quality pre-K experiences for children across the state. The plan should include details on the number of staff and additional funding needed to carry out these new responsibilities. VDOE should submit its proposal to the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees by November 1, 2018. (Chapter 4)

Recommendation 12	
Category	Cost
	TBD

RECOMMENDATION 13

The Virginia Department of Social Services and the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning should use the results of a multi-dimensional kindergarten readiness assessment to assess how well the Child Care Subsidy Program promotes readiness in all key developmental domains. (Chapter 5)

Recommendation 13	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 14

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Social Services and the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning to develop a list of research-based, age-appropriate curricula to be available as a resource for child care providers participating in the Child Care Subsidy Program. (Chapter 5)

Recommendation 14	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 15

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Social Services to develop, publish, and maintain a list of professional development courses and providers to be available as a resource for child care professionals participating in the Child Care Subsidy Program. (Chapter 5)

Recommendation 15	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 16

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 2.2-5304 and § 22.1-214 of the Code of Virginia to require the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services and Virginia Department of Education to develop and implement a plan to (i) ensure all Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education practitioners receive initial and ongoing training on the programs' scoring processes; (ii) regularly assess the validity of ratings through systematic and documented analyses; and (iii) use results of these analyses to improve the technical assistance and systematically target assistance to programs that need it. (Chapter 6)

Recommendation 16	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 17

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 22.1-214 of the Code of Virginia to direct the Virginia Department of Education to develop and implement a process to regularly and systematically collect information about the use of evidence-based practices in local Early Childhood Special Education programs. The Virginia Department of Education should use this information, together with data on inclusion and outcomes, to identify low-performing local programs and systematically target technical assistance to those in need of assistance. (Chapter 6)

Recommendation 17	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 18

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Secretary of Education and the Secretary of Health and Human Resources to convene a working group to (i) identify and assess the key barriers to serving Early Childhood Special Education participants in inclusive settings and (ii) develop a plan to increase the percentage of Early Childhood Special Education participants served in inclusive settings. Members of the working group should include state agency administrators of early learning programs, including the Virginia Preschool Initiative, Virginia Preschool Initiative Plus, Child Care Subsidy Program, and the Virginia Head Start State Collaboration Office. The working group should also include representatives of other stakeholder groups, as appropriate. The findings of the workgroup should be submitted in a written report to the House Committee on Education, House Appropriations Committee, Senate Committee on Education and Health, and Senate Finance Committee by November 1, 2019. (Chapter 6)

Recommendation 18	
Category	Cost
	Minimal

OPTION 1

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act to direct the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning to provide training to school divisions on how to effectively use Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program data to improve instructional practices. Training should be prioritized for the school divisions that would most benefit from state assistance. The General Assembly could appropriate sufficient funding. (Chapter 2)

Option 1	
Category	Cost
	\$100K (annually)

OPTION 2

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act to direct the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning to incorporate a research-based assessment of physical and motor skills in the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program assessment. The General Assembly could appropriate sufficient funding. (Chapter 2)

Option 2	
Category	Cost
	\$500K (one-time)*
*To develop and incorporate new physical and motor skills assessment.	

OPTION 3

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act to direct the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (UVA CASTL) to design and implement a two-year pilot of a comprehensive research-based curriculum for the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). The goal would be to offer the curriculum to localities free of charge. UVA CASTL could submit a report to the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees on the (i) results of the pilot and (ii) feasibility and costs to the state of offering the curriculum to VPI providers statewide. The General Assembly could appropriate sufficient funding. (Chapter 4)

Option 3	
Category	Cost
	<\$3.7M* (one-time)
*Estimated costs include two-year pilot.	

OPTION 4

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act to direct the Virginia Department of Social Services to establish and administer a pilot program to provide higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates for providers that demonstrate higher quality care. The General Assembly could provide the Department of Social Services with additional funding for the pilot. The Virginia Department of Social Services should submit a report on the results of the pilot, along with options to modify and expand it, to the House Appropriation and Senate Finance Committees. (Chapter 5)

Option 4	
Category	Cost
	\$910K to \$6M* (annually)
*Depends on design of pilot and ability of providers to reach higher quality levels	

OPTION 5

The General Assembly could repeal § 58.1-322.03(3) of the Code of Virginia to eliminate the Virginia Child Care and Dependent Expenses Deduction. Available revenue could then be used to (i) fund improvements to state-supported early childhood development programs and (ii) serve additional families through effective voluntary home visiting programs and subsidize care for children 12 months or younger currently on the Child Care Subsidy Program waiting list. (Chapter 7)