

Preschool Pilot Grants

**Presentation to
Senate Finance Education Subcommittee**

January 11, 2007

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In its initial report, one of the primary recommendations of the Council is to address several components of a **voluntary** high quality preschool system through pilots in several local communities. Governor Kaine has proposed that \$4.6 million be allocated to test these strategies in six communities through a pilot initiative for the fall of 2007. Strategies to be explored include use of quality ratings system and delivery in mixed (public and private) sites.

Purpose

The pilots will be a feasibility study of strategies for models of high-quality preschool network delivery. The pilots will build on the strengths of existing programs but address the barriers to serving all eligible children. The initiative will focus on increasing the quality, consistency, and strength of Virginia's preschool network, while increasing access to students who will benefit from the school readiness services.

Context: Building on Existing Programs

While the state-funded Virginia Preschool Initiative program is successful in helping participating children become better prepared for kindergarten, there are barriers in the current program to reaching all eligible "at risk" children. Currently, the program serves approximately 12,000 students, but 6,000 more four-year-olds who have been identified as "at risk" under the current formula based on free lunch estimates in Virginia are not able to participate in the program. A lack of school space, cost of starting up the program, and the inability of some communities to contribute the local match deter some localities from fully serving eligible children in need of these services. Another factor in low participation is the lack of parent awareness of the importance of high-quality preschool and/or of the availability of services.

In addition, integrating the federally-funded and locally-administered Head Start Program with the state-funded and locally-administered Virginia Preschool Initiative has not proven to be a simple feat. The two programs are not meant to serve the same children, since Head Start is intended to serve children aged three to five up to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level and VPI is intended to serve four-year-old children who are at-risk but not served by Head Start. Yet in some situations, often because there is not strong oversight or monitoring of the requirements, recruitment and enrollment by these criteria are not followed, straining the relationship between the programs. Federal Head Start requirements are stringent and often inflexible; the opportunity to blend children in classrooms to maximize resources is neglected because of the logistical intricacies.

The Start Strong pilot initiative suggests a number of strategies to remedy the situation: remove the structural barriers by incorporating private providers, where space is readily available; consider the feasibility of braiding various funding streams and other resources (including the potential of parent tuition for those families who can afford it) in blended classrooms; and to test alternative solutions for the local share.

Program Overview

The pilot grants are competitive and awarded on a one-time basis. These funds are specifically designated for local implementation of strategies to develop models of high quality preschool network delivery. The ultimate goal for communities is that children have access to the school readiness services that help them achieve school and life success.

Pilots in six communities in Virginia are expected to serve in total up to an additional 1,250 children not already enrolled in publicly-funded preschool programs. The primary target will be children who are identified as “*at-risk*” (by definition of factors such as free and reduced-price lunch eligibility or limited English proficiency) and *unserved* (by publicly funded preschool programs).

Primary strategies to be tested through the pilots are:

- use of Quality Ratings System in conjunction with pilots to identify eligible private providers
Not only does the QRS assist with identifying likely private partners, but serves to systematically increase the quality of care and education in a community. Both public and private settings will be rated with the QRS. The QRS is an effective consumer education tool for parents, providing them information about the quality of available preschool settings. The draft QRS will be tested as part of the pilot initiative.
- use of both public schools and private provider settings
Because school space is maxed-out in some localities, using private providers not only eliminates the need for expensive capital expansion, but also preserves small businesses and provides families with more options.

The Department of Education will be the lead state entity in coordinating the pilot programs. The pilot proposal includes two staff positions at the Department of Education. These staff members will provide technical assistance to pilot communities, assisting with components such as the coordination of local collaboration activities, communication with the lead agency, scheduling for quality ratings assessments, coaching communities in the logistics of public-private partnership model, and braiding and documenting funding streams. Funds will flow from the Department of Education to the fiscal agent in each community pilot. The fiscal agent will then be responsible for disbursing funds to participating schools and providers.

Eligible applicants

Localities that are willing to meet pilot criteria are encouraged to apply. Localities are encouraged to consider multi-jurisdictional applications to facilitate regional planning and delivery.

The applying agency must be an entity that has the authority to receive state funds and spend against them (e.g. local school system, city or county government, local department of social services).

Applicants must:

- 1) Show the commitment of relevant leaders to form a local collaboration as the coordinated planning group for the locality. Preference will be given to applicants whose emerging councils are as diverse and inclusive as possible. The shared leadership of a local collaboration provides for more integrated, systemic planning for early childhood education within local communities.

A successful local collaboration will:

- have a history of good local collaboration between the school superintendent, city or county manager, the local school board, department of social services, private child care providers, and the Head Start director
- have business leaders and private or community foundations willing to support early childhood education
- serve as the coordinating, planning, and decision-making entity for the locality, assessing current funding streams, programs, enrollment, and needs regarding preschool
- be able and willing to develop the public-private partnership for preschool delivery and to serve as a model for the state
- include private providers who are likely to be eligible and have the capacity to participate in the initiative
- make determinations regarding eligible children
- facilitate coordination among schools, city/county government, Head Start, the private child care community, and faith-based organizations to develop a plan for single point of entry for recruitment and enrollment of preschool children in a community, reducing duplication and maximizing federal dollars.

- 2) Develop a plan and budget for use of the grant funds which address implementation of the noted test strategies and high quality preschool services for up to an additional 250 students.

- 3) Utilize both public and private providers as part of their pilot initiative. A successful plan will show a commitment of spending a minimum of 10% of the per-pupil funding allocation in private settings.

- 4) Agree that all participating preschool providers will be subject to assessment and rating through the Quality Rating System, which will be piloted and tested in conjunction with the preschool pilot initiative.

The applying community will identify partners within the private community that potentially have the quality features as well as capacity to serve four-year-olds in the initiative. The local community will pre-screen these providers based on quality criteria developed locally. As part of the pilot project, these providers will be rated and assessed according to the QRS methodology. In addition, the public settings will also be subjected to the QRS assessment and rating. Those providers that do not

yet achieve the appropriate quality rating will be provided with technical assistance and appropriate resources to assist them with increasing their quality ranking to continue participation in the initiative. The pilot will allow for testing and refining the QRS process.

5) Agree to consider braiding of funding streams, possibly including parent tuition, within classrooms.

Braiding of funding within classrooms, including parent tuition, would allow blending children of low-income families with those of greater means, as well as blending low-performers with those of higher ability. These “mixed delivery” classrooms have a number of benefits to quality and student gains, including attracting higher quality teachers, greater classroom productivity, and reducing need for more costly special education services.

6) Develop an evaluation plan; participate in required tracking of outcomes, data collection and reporting as part of a statewide evaluation system.

Preference will be given to applicants that also meet the following criteria:

7) Test utilization of a comprehensive assessment tool in addition to PALS Pre-K. *Comprehensive assessments such as the Work Sampling System reflect more than just pre-literacy skills, and can be used to assess gains in other areas of growth and development and as a diagnostic tool to improve instruction.*

8) Participate in a teacher mentoring and coaching study to test the impact of various types of professional development strategies.

Funding Availability and Grant Period

Pending approval in the 2007 legislative session, six communities will be awarded one-year pilot grants for the period of July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008.

Each community may receive an average of approximately \$120,000 for start-up costs such as classroom furnishings and equipment, curriculum and instructional materials, and computers. Each community may receive an average of approximately \$600,000 for the state share of pupil expenditures, to serve approximately 250 students not currently served by a publicly-funded preschool program. Applicants must provide information about additional funding streams to be utilized to serve the students projected, including federal, local, corporate or foundation contribution, and parent-pay, where appropriate. The match requirement may be partially or fully waived if it poses a significant barrier to participation.

PROCESS OF REVIEW AND CRITERIA FOR AWARD

Grant applications will be reviewed by a panel comprised of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Executive Director of the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives, and the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services. These representatives will make recommendations to the Secretary of Education, who will make final determinations for grant awards. Site visits or interviews may be conducted with finalists.

Draft application materials will be made available by January 20, 2007, with a deadline for submitting an application by March 15. Applications will be accepted prior to March 15, but will not be considered until that date. Grant recipients will be determined by April 15, 2007. Grant awards will be subject to final approval of funding of the initiative by the General Assembly.

Pilot sites must be prepared to begin activities immediately upon award notification with the goal of enrolling the additional students for the academic year beginning fall of 2007.

Specific criteria to be used by grant reviewers

Leadership, Capacity, and Support	20 POINTS
Evidence of emerging effective collaboration, leadership, and inclusion.....	10 points
Evidence of local commitment to sustained progress...	10 points
Quality and Comprehensiveness	35 POINTS
Successful Integration of Existing Programs.....	10 points
Implementation of Single Point of Entry.....	5 points
Provision of Comprehensive Services.....	5 points
Strategies to reach unserved at risk students.....	15 points
Ambition in Testing Innovative Strategies	40 POINTS
Innovative Braiding of Funding Streams.....	20 points
Allocation to private providers above minimum 10%.....	10 points
Effective Communication with Parents.....	5 points
Multi-jurisdictional Approach.....	5 points
Plan for Evaluation.....	5 POINTS
<hr/> TOTAL POSSIBLE	<hr/> 100 POINTS