

Presentation to
Senate Finance Education Subcommittee

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Good Afternoon:

I want to thank you for inviting me to join you today as you begin your important work for the 2007 legislative session. I am Stephen Jones, Superintendent of Norfolk Public Schools — a school system of 36,000 students, with approximately 64 percent eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch.

I'm proud of the gains being made by our students, and I am confident we will reach our goal to become world class. I have provided copies of our "Urban Advantage" brochure to give you a glimpse of our outstanding school system.

First, allow me to congratulate you for placing such a high priority on public education. I also want to take this opportunity to commend Governor Tim Kaine. Our Commonwealth is fortunate to have a Governor who regards public education as the state's most important responsibility. It is gratifying to know that his "from competence to excellence" vision closely mirrors Norfolk Public Schools' own world-class vision.

Much of what the Governor is calling for in his proposed budget amendments — increased preschool opportunities, early reading intervention, and Algebra Readiness — is critical to the work going on in Norfolk Public Schools.

And, while the issue of teachers' salaries is not specifically on the agenda today, I would be remiss if I did not mention that the most important component of a student's success is his or her teacher. I know the General Assembly will continue to look for ways to help school districts around the Commonwealth recruit and retain a high quality teaching staff.

I was asked to center my remarks today primarily on the Governor's focus on preschool. This is an area that I feel especially passionate about. In every school system I've been associated with, in Maryland and in New York, the issue of providing quality preschool programs has been a major topic of discussion. I'm not surprised that it is important to Virginia also.

As a member of the Governor's Start Strong Council, I am happy to speak with you today in support of the Commonwealth's efforts to strengthen existing programs. Let me begin by stating that I believe all three- and four-year-olds should be afforded these early learning opportunities — not just those who are at risk.

In our local newspaper, the *Virginian-Pilot*, a letter to the editor appeared recently which really caught my attention. A mother wrote:

“My five-year-old just started kindergarten at a Norfolk public school. At the end of his first day, his teacher informed me that he had a ‘bad’ day. He wasn’t sitting in his seat or staying in line, and he talked out of turn.

Her first question was if he had attended preschool. Well... no. Norfolk has free public preschool, but the child or family must qualify. My children didn’t qualify, and we couldn’t afford to send them to a private preschool.

His teacher went on to tell me that the kindergarten curriculum is more fast-paced now and that children should already have the skills that my child is lacking. If these skills are a prerequisite of kindergarten, then all children should be entitled to free preschool, not just those who statistically can’t afford it. Why should my child be left behind because he has lower-middle class working parents?”

I believe the mother asks some questions that deserve a response. And, she is not alone. Why shouldn’t her child be given the same advantages — a head start — on academic success?

I’ve spent more than 30 years in public education, and I can tell you: Children who start school behind often stay behind.

There’s no longer a debate about the value of prekindergarten. There is a growing body of research indicating that getting children off to a good start in the first five years of life significantly contributes to their long-term development — socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually.

I am convinced that prekindergarten education is a smart investment — one which actually saves communities money by ensuring a literate, capable work force for the future.

The prekindergarten program for three- and four-year-olds in Norfolk has been in existence for some 30 years. It was originally funded solely through Title I and the local budget. Additionally, since 1995, thanks to the wisdom and support of this legislative body, youngsters in Norfolk have benefited greatly from the Virginia Preschool Initiative.

It’s no secret that in Norfolk, we consider pre-kindergarten a precursor to future academic success. This year, we have 105 classes serving approximately 1,600 four-year-olds. Our kindergarten enrollment is around 3,000. What this means is only a little more than half of our kindergarteners have had the advantage of attending pre-K programs.

I'm proud to say also that we have 17 classes serving 274 three-year-olds. These are all federally funded and are housed primarily at two early childhood centers. One of these centers, the Berkley-Campostella Early Childhood Center, which serves both three- and four-year-olds, has been in existence for more than 16 years.

When talking about the Berkley Campostella Early Childhood Center, I think it's worth mentioning the late Senator Stanley Walker, who represented Norfolk in the General Assembly for some 36 years. As a former senior member of the Senate who served as President Pro Tempore and as co-chair of the Senate Finance Committee, I understand Senator Walker was instrumental in securing funding for Norfolk's first early childhood facility — the Berkley Campostella Early Childhood Center. I'm proud to say this center remains a model program today.

Currently, like others around the Commonwealth, funding for preschool programs is provided through a combination of VPI, Title I, and local monies. We are able to serve almost 1,500 children with VPI and local match funding at a total cost of almost \$8 million. An additional 180 four-year-olds are served using local funds only. And, this doesn't even consider three-year-olds. As you know, these classes are funded through the federally funded Title I programs.

In Norfolk, there are approximately 200 four-year-olds and 1,800 three-year-olds eligible for prekindergarten who remain unserved. These are children... just like the one the Norfolk mother wrote about... who, in my opinion, are likely to begin kindergarten at a distinct disadvantage.

I realize the issue of funding preschool is a costly proposition. But... it's an investment that is worth it... in terms of increased high school graduation, increased employment, as well as lower rates of crime and dependence on public assistance.

In Norfolk, we have established a Universal Pre-K committee to ensure that our curriculum aligns with Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning and the Standards of Learning.

Since adopting the nationally acclaimed High/Scope curriculum in 1988, our prekindergarten students have been tested in the fall and then again in the spring to determine whether gains were made in each curriculum area. Also, each year the program is reviewed by our department of Strategic Evaluation, Assessment and Support... and statistically significant increases are found on all subtests of the Child Observation Form — an instrument developed by the High/Scope Foundation to assess skills.

Equally impressive is the achievement of NPS prekindergarten children on the Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screen (PALS). These children have exceeded the spring benchmarks for PALS PreK every year since it began in 2001.

Clearly, students in Norfolk benefit from prekindergarten. Additionally, I am confident our high quality preschool programs are helping to eliminate the need for grade repetition and reduce remediation costs. We have data to support this assertion.

Our data reveal that third graders who have had the advantage of PreK outperform others on the Math SOLs and on the English SOLs. And, it's these very same students who are helping us make significant progress towards eliminating achievement gaps.

Last year, 92 percent of our third graders with PreK experience passed the math SOLs, compared with 87 percent overall. In English, third graders who attended PreK had an 81 percent pass rate, compared to a 77 percent pass rate for all third graders.

When people ask why should we invest in preschool... when others ask if this shouldn't be the parents' responsibility... my response would be: It's money well spent — a “win-win proposition.”

Children win because they start kindergarten with the basic skills needed to lead to greater success in school and in life. There is a significant cost-savings across the board...in terms of greater efficiency through reduction in special education, reduction of grade retention, and higher rates of graduation, lower rates of dropouts, and more graduates pursuing postsecondary education.

Communities win because children who enter kindergarten ready to learn are more likely to grow into successful, contributing members of society... buying homes and paying taxes. And, they are less likely to engage in criminal activity or require public assistance.

Businesses win because research shows that children acquire the powerful literacy skills needed to be successful in the work place including the ability to communicate effectively, to solve problems and to work as a team.

In closing...

In my professional opinion... as a public school superintendent... I support all efforts to strengthen and to enhance Virginia's public preschool learning opportunities. While my desire would be to offer a universal preschool program to all students, I commend Governor Kaine for embarking down this path with a select number of pilot projects.

Also, I am respectful of the many priorities faced by members of this committee in terms of funding initiatives. Still, I am convinced that providing high-quality preschool opportunities for more children is a worthy goal and one where Virginia can truly make a difference.

Thank you and please know how much we appreciate what you do on behalf of public education in our Commonwealth.