



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Executive Department

Executive Directive Four (2019)

Establishing The Governor's Executive Leadership Team on School Readiness

Importance of the Initiative

Nearly 100,000 students enter kindergarten classrooms in Virginia schools each fall. Only 60% of these children start school with the key literacy, math, and socio-emotional skills needed to be successful in school. When considering the most vulnerable young learners, the numbers are more concerning; fewer than half of children from economically disadvantaged families enter school fully prepared for success.

Every Virginia child, regardless of background or zip code, is capable of and deserves to enter school prepared to reach his or her full potential. Yet the stark disparities in access to quality early childhood care and education contribute to disparate outcomes for children, especially for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, children who are English Language Learners, and children in rural or underserved areas.

Last year, I directed my administration to explore ways to increase access to early childhood care and education for Virginia families through Executive Orders 11, 12, and 13. My administration remains committed to building on this progress and the good work of our partners across the Commonwealth.

School Readiness Landscape

In recent years, state leaders have worked in a collaborative, bipartisan manner to strengthen Virginia's early childhood system. The General Assembly created the School Readiness Committee, a state-level advisory council, in 2016. In recent sessions, the legislature strengthened criminal background checks, expanded health and safety expectations, and invested in improving instruction quality. As part of these efforts, the legislature directed the Joint Legislative and Audit Review Commission (JLARC) to analyze and improve the system. JLARC released its analysis in December 2017. Through bipartisan efforts, during the 2018 session, actions were taken to improve school readiness outcomes in the Commonwealth. This included measuring kindergarten readiness through the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program and creating and monitoring a uniform measure of quality in all Virginia Preschool Initiative classrooms. The state's most recent expansion of quality preschool through Virginia Preschool Initiative Plus, provided by a federal grant, resulted in the elimination of the school readiness

gap between economically disadvantaged children and their non-disadvantaged peers, according to analysis by SRI International.

Additionally, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources and the Secretary of Education, in combination with the School Readiness Committee, and other public and private entities, have made a concerted effort to improve school readiness in the Commonwealth over the last five years. The Commonwealth has invested state dollars and secured significant federal funds to pilot and promote efforts in local communities, including the 2019 Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5). Eleven communities across Virginia are leading the way in efforts to unify, measure, and strengthen access and quality in their early childhood systems. Through PDG B-5, the state has undergone a needs assessment and strategic planning process, which included data analysis, synthesis of 15 state reports, focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and intensive engagement with an Impact Workgroup. This culminated with a convening of the School Readiness Committee in June 2019 to review and establish statewide priorities and goals for improving school readiness.

Achievement Gap and Funding Needs

Virginia is ranked 33rd nationally in terms of state spending on preschool according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. The vast majority of economically disadvantaged families with children five and under in Virginia do not have access to an affordable early childhood care and education option. As of Fall 2018, 24% of economically disadvantaged four-year-olds and 72% of economically disadvantaged three-year-olds were not served through federal, state, or local government funding, which includes childcare subsidy, Head Start and school-based preschool. To close the gap for underserved children, Virginia needs to increase state funding to offer more children an affordable, quality publicly-funded option. Families should still be able to choose the setting that best serves their children, whether from a public provider or private provider who accepts public funding.

Establishment of Quality Metrics

Current data about publicly-funded programs – preschool, Early Head Start, Head Start and Child Care Assistance – is incomplete. Although the Virginia Quality initiative is open to all publically funded early learning programs, there is no mandate for participation and therefore no uniform way that quality is measured in Virginia. Without a consistent standard for comparison of early learning programs, it is difficult for families to understand their options and for communities to strengthen their local systems.

The Commonwealth must focus on building a uniform quality measurement and improvement system that evaluates and supports every publicly-funded program serving children five and under. This includes centers, family day homes, and school settings. A uniform measurement system would allow the Commonwealth to align supports and incentives to reach uniform quality measurements. As part of this process, it will be important to balance the availability of care with educational standards so that quality options for low-income families are expanded and not lowered.

Increasing public funding and implementing a quality measurement and improvement system will require more unified oversight and accountability at the state level. The Bipartisan Policy Institute ranked Virginia as 37th in the nation for state integration of early childhood programs. The Commonwealth must address this fragmentation of funding and programs in order for efforts to support and scale high quality options to be successful.

Establishment of the Executive Leadership Team on School Readiness

Therefore, I am establishing an Executive Leadership Team on School Readiness (Executive Leadership Team or Team) to address these critical concerns. This Team shall make recommendations that unify and strengthen the early childhood system to ensure all Virginia children have equal opportunities to enter school ready to succeed. This Team will identify and seek to address disparities both in access to and quality of early childhood care and education across the Commonwealth.

The Executive Leadership Team's core objectives include:

1. Ensure that all at-risk three-year-olds and four-year-olds in Virginia have access to a publicly-subsidized option; and
2. Ensure that all publicly-funded programs that serve children birth to five are measured as quality as part of a uniform quality rating system by 2025.

Executive Leadership Team Priorities

To meet its mission, the Team will work with the Commonwealth's many partners to:

1. Conduct a series of stakeholder listening sessions around the state to share needs assessment and strategic plan findings and to solicit feedback on how to improve school readiness in the Commonwealth.
2. Analyze existing funding streams and formulas including, but not limited to the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), IDEA Part B, Title I, Early Head Start, Head Start and the Child Care Development Block Grant in order to make recommendations on how to maximize access for underserved children and families. Analysis should illustrate what would be required to ensure that every underserved three-year-old and four-year-old has access to a publicly subsidized option by 2025 without jeopardizing access for infants and toddlers.
3. Build, pilot and scale a uniform quality measurement and improvement system for all early childhood care and education programs that accept public funds to serve children five and under outside of their homes.
4. Develop recommendations to most effectively consolidate state oversight and administration for all early care and education programs that serve children out of their home.

Reporting

The Team shall convene as necessary to accomplish these objectives and meet with stakeholders to gather information. A written report shall be provided to the Governor by September 30, 2019, and subsequent reports will provided upon the request of the Governor.

Composition of the Executive Leadership Team

The Executive Leadership Team will be co-chaired by the Chief School Readiness Officer and the Commissioner of Virginia Department of Social Services. In addition, the Team shall be comprised of staff from the following executive branch agencies, and any other state agencies, as designated by the co-chairs:

- Department of Education;
- Department of Social Services; and
- Department of Planning and Budget.

Effective Date

This Executive Directive shall be effective upon its signing and shall remain in force and effect unless amended or rescinded by future executive order or directive.

Given under my hand and under the Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia, this 24th day of July, 2019.



Handwritten signature of Ralph S. Northam in black ink.

Ralph S. Northam, Governor

Attest:

Handwritten signature of Kelly Thomasson in black ink.

Kelly Thomasson, Secretary of the Commonwealth