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The Roadmap for School Readiness: A Win-Win Opportunity for Virginia

Why is school readiness for children so significant in a discussion about Virginia's economic and workforce vitality?

In a 2017 report, "Workforce of Today, Workforce of Tomorrow," the U.S. Chamber of Commerce noted, "A broad set of **socially and economically valuable skills** start developing in children's very first months, build over time, and are critical determinants of academic and economic success." (*The author of this report, Katharine Stevens, from the American Enterprise Institute, is with us today.*)

This inextricable link between a strong start in the early years and a talented future workforce has been recognized and championed by Virginia's business community for many years and has been included as a priority in the Virginia Chamber's *Blueprint Virginia* since 2013.

Starting with Governor Mark Warner's creation of the Early Learning Council in 2005 – business leaders have been key partners in moving forward a strong early education agenda.

We've come a long way since 2005. Some basic facts are no longer debated:

- Experiences from birth to age five forever shape the brain,
- The achievement gap is already pervasive at kindergarten entry, and
- Children's success is nested within their families and communities.

I'm proud to say the Virginia business community is responsible for:

- Moving many of our thought leaders from rhetoric to
- Understanding the research to
- Seizing the reality that early childhood and school readiness have a great deal to do with workforce readiness in the Commonwealth.

Science informs us the development of the brain and emergence of important skills and functions not only begin very early – before birth – but also that they are cumulative and sequential. As Nobel Laureate and noted economist Jim Heckman says, "Skill begets skill."

As we heard from Dr. Friedlander, the science is inarguable and compels us to an essential focus on **early** childhood.

As we think of this critically essential period of life – prenatal to age 5 - remember it is cumulative and sequential. All future investments – like the K-12 system, higher education, job training and professional development – all build from the base of the initial segment of this continuum...whether that base be one of strength or weakness.

Back in 2013 when the VA Chamber launched the first Blueprint process, concerns about education and workforce emerged as key issues for the state's economic competitiveness. There was clear recognition that the skills needed for a strong workforce begin forming very early on and that early childhood education needed to be considered an essential pillar in our education and workforce systems.

In addition to being the very start of our workforce pipeline and a strong determinant of our future economic success, early childhood education is also a critically important support for our current workforce.

An unprecedented number of American mothers are in the workforce today. Almost two-thirds of mothers with children under 6 are working outside the home, compared with fewer than one in 10 just seven decades ago. Nearly three in 10 mothers now return to work within two months of their baby's birth, and almost 40% of mothers with an infant under a year old are employed full time.

What does that tell us? That tells us that many more young children are spending significant amounts of time in early care and learning environments – whether center-based, faith-based, school-based or in-home care.

These providers and programs are not only supporting the working parents, they are on the frontlines of a critical school readiness opportunity – they are literally brain builders.

As a CPA, I would be remiss if I didn't talk about the financial impacts. Nationally, 45% of parents report being absent from work due to childcare breakdowns. That translates to \$28.9 billion in wages lost by families and businesses feel a \$4.4 billion impact each year as a result of childcare related absenteeism, according to Child Care Aware.

For these reasons and more, the business community has a vested interest in ensuring Virginia's youngest children have a strong start and families have access to high-quality early care and education.

While pushing forward the correlation of the early years to workforce and talent development, the business community also strongly recognizes that early childhood education needs to be a public-private endeavor. The public sector can't do it all and can't do it alone.

Government tends to respond to problems by implementing programs. Too often solutions come in the form of a "blunt response" when in fact, needs and assets are differentiated and variable – across children, families, neighborhoods, and regions of our richly diverse state.

Currently, early childhood education in Virginia consists of a quilt of programs, siloed through block grants that come to communities through various agencies; this well-intended "non-system" developed over many years.

It lands on communities and families to do the hard work of knitting these programs together. Think of each program as a building block. The private sector – and what VECF and their local Smart Beginnings initiatives attempt to do - are to serve as the mortar that takes the pile of building blocks and forms them into a sturdy, coherent foundation. Public private partnerships are necessary to drive success for a complex problem and opportunity like school readiness.

In the last 2-3 years, there has been an accelerated amount of activity related to early childhood development – both nationally and here in Virginia. That includes a great deal of careful, thoughtful exploration by our policymakers. In Virginia we've seen

- Movement toward Virginia's clearer articulation of values and priorities through programs like mixed-delivery grants,
- Work toward reform of the state preschool program,
- State-level forums for deliberation and focus on the issue,
- The formation of the School Readiness Committee on which I have the privilege to serve and chair

But we still have not achieved a coordinated framework to overcome the patchwork system that exists.

The challenge remains to carve a clear pathway - setting a catalytic vision for cohesive, effective and accountable early childhood system.

The most consequential barrier to more progress is simply this: Virginia has yet to adopt the guiding vision and viable governance/leadership framework needed to get the job done.

As noted earlier, various services and initiatives are in place, many of which are commendable and effective, yet any attempt at assessing the overall status of school readiness efforts is handicapped by the absence of a comprehensive

vision and of a plan that articulates priorities, goals, measurable objectives, action steps, and leadership accountability.

In the absence of a unified system framework, which cut across 8 state agencies, it is unlikely to be well-coordinated or efficient system. This inefficiency reduces the potential impact of early childhood investments.

Thanks to:

- The leadership of Governor and Mrs. Northam
- Bi-partisan legislative support for a strong start to the workforce pipeline, and
- Increased public sector capacity from Virginia's first Chief School Readiness Officer,

The Commonwealth is at a tipping point in its school readiness efforts.

Recognizing this "tipping point", several business executives with us today and others, have joined together with the VA Chamber and VECF to be part of an Early Childhood Business Alliance whose goal is to champion a durable strategic plan for early childhood in Virginia and help deliver on the early childhood priorities outlined in the Blueprint.

The Virginia's business community is working with the Administration, legislators from both sides of the aisle, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, and local community leaders, to craft a comprehensive framework - an Early Childhood Success Act. This Act will outline in statute a cohesive public-private, data-informed, early childhood system bolstered by local and regional innovation.

By joining forces to articulate a shared vision and action plan for our youngest citizens, we can position Virginia firmly on the path to school readiness and academic success, delivering a more capable workforce and a more prosperous and livable Commonwealth.

And although it will ultimately require more investment, we have the responsibility now to spend existing money more efficiently.

To be responsive, business leaders suggest a framework that takes a "bottom-up" approach – much like GO VA in economic development. Different communities have different challenges and assets – and require different strategies for success.

We humans have a tendency to shift our focus to the next shiny object. Without a comprehensive, rational action plan to guide equitable early childhood policies and investment, it is very easy to lose sight of the goal and head toward that shiny object.

So, it is important for Virginia to adopt a viable and enduring framework to guide development of an efficient and accountable early childhood system.

This would be a sign that Virginia is ready to make the policy decisions and corresponding financial commitments that will position young children's school readiness where it belongs – at the highest rank of public priorities.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

We need each of you here today to be part of shaping this framework – whether you are a local school superintendent, county executive, part of a local Smart Beginnings initiative, a business leader or a philanthropist...you are all needed.

Your leadership, know-how and perspectives are necessary for us to work together, with our legislators and the Administration, to ensure that Virginia's framework works for communities and families; is locally and regionally responsive; is a shared public-private endeavor; is equitable and accountable; that is a unified system that will support Virginia's children and families today to deliver a strong workforce of tomorrow.

Now is the time. Let's do this together. Let's provide the leadership and incentive to make Virginia a model of how to do this well. I am confident we can!